

Trouble Ahead

As the UN struggles to build its presence in Kosovo, the problems it faces mount by the day. Two months after the war in Kosovo ended, the enormity of the task facing the province's new international administrators is becoming increasingly apparent.

A decade of Serb repression and three months of war have left in their wake a ravaged economy, destroyed homes and businesses, ethnic tensions and a rising crime rate. Moreover, despite the presence of NATO-led peace-keepers, law and order have yet to be established, and basic services, such as water, telephones, electricity and refuse collection, are either lacking or intermittent.

Reconstruction aid is slow to arrive and economic recovery plans have yet to be drawn up. As a result, possibly unfairly, the United Nations' Mission in Kosovo (UNMIK) is increasingly coming under fire both from Kosovo Albanians and from some international quarters.

UN officials say that the reason for their problems is the slowness with which they are getting the necessary resources and personnel. Whatever the explanation, the criticism has put the UN mission on the defensive just when it needs to be at its most daring.

To be fair to UNMIK, it is facing a situation that even a well-established government would have difficulty dealing with. Moreover, UNMIK is operating without a proper budget and financial system, with less than one fifth of the planned police force of 3,100, and a current civilian staff of fewer than 1,000.

At the same time, the length of the UNMIK mandate is not clear. Although UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan has said that the UN may remain in Kosovo for as long as a decade, UNMIK appears to be unsure about its role after elections, which are currently scheduled for September 2000.

Disputes between Albanians and Serbs, as well as within the Albanian community over apartments, shops, and other property frequently end in violence. Returning refugees who have been rendered homeless claim homes once owned by Serbs, and evict the occupants by force.

Albanians who were once evicted from apartments by Serb courts are now returning to reclaim their former homes from the Serb beneficiaries of the court rulings, only to find another Albanian family got there first.

In former state-owned companies--even in those that have been closed down or declared bankrupt--Albanians who were dismissed from their jobs after the removal of Kosovo's autonomy are returning. They are forming governing councils led by the former directors, or by appointees of Kosovo's self-appointed, ethnic Albanian "provisional government", dominated by the Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA).

With KFOR backing, UNMIK has been able to exert its authority in the postal services, telecommunications, and the electric utility services. However, the issues of how to begin production and pay salaries have not been resolved, not to mention ownership and privatisation.

New shops, restaurants, cafes and kiosks have sprung up all over Pristina and street vendors ply their trade on every corner. In the absence of any local authority and planning laws, anything goes.

The absence of an accepted legal system could become the source of major confrontation. UNMIK has declared valid all Serbian laws applying in Kosovo prior to its arrival, except those considered contrary to international norms on human rights. However, the Kosovo Albanians' "provisional government" says that it will not work under "laws that were used to suppress Albanians". And Albanian judges demand that all laws adopted after the removal of Kosovo's autonomy in 1989 be declared void.

In the absence of indigenous wealth creation, a service sector is developing around the international community in Kosovo. The influx of foreign currency via an estimated 50,000 aid workers and other international personnel, has already created a bubble economy.

International organisations are the most prolific employers, paying drivers, interpreters and receptionists wages as high as 1,200 German marks per month. That compares with 200 German marks a month for a professor at Pristina University. The quickest way to foreign riches is by renting out a house or apartment to foreigners who are prepared to pay anywhere between 1,000 and 12,000 German marks per month.

In the euphoria of their perceived victory and new-found liberty, most Kosovo Albanians have started rebuilding their homes and lives with gusto and are optimistic about the future. However, a moribund economy, limited employment prospects, and the absence of proper law-enforcement may yet push many towards crime, political radicalisation, or migration to the West.

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