

Ethnic killings escalate in Kosovo

Bill Vann
5 March 1998

Armed clashes and mass demonstrations in the former Yugoslav territory of Kosovo are threatening to plunge the southern Balkans into a new and even more dangerous round of ethno-nationalist warfare.

The latest round of violence erupted with a brutal counterinsurgency operation by Serbian paramilitary forces against the ethnic Albanian village of Drenica on February 28. At least 25 people were killed, including women and children. Serbian paramilitary forces attacked the village with helicopter gunships and armored cars. A number of the victims were abducted and tortured before being executed. The Serbian forces carried out the slaughter in retaliation for an ambush by the Kosovo Liberation Army (UCK) in which four Serb officers were killed.

Tens of thousands of people took to the streets of the Kosovan capital of Pristina to denounce the killings. Serbian police responded with water cannon, tear gas grenades and baton charges. Many civilians were reported injured, and Albanian sources claimed that Serb police executed one student protester at point blank range.

This was the biggest demonstration in Kosovo since 1989, when Serbian President Slobodan Milosevic stripped the territory of the extensive political autonomy which it had enjoyed under the Tito regime as a province of the Serb republic. The confrontation in Kosovo a decade ago served as the dress rehearsal for the civil wars which were to wrack both Croatia and Bosnia in the 1990s. It also provided the basis for Milosevic's own rise to power based on the program of Serbian ethno-chauvinism.

Milosevic identified himself and the ruling Serbian Communist Party with the protests of the Serbian minority against alleged abuses at the hands of ethnic Albanian party leaders in Kosovo. The Albanian politicians, meanwhile, turned as well toward nationalist politics, seeking independence from Serbia.

The government in Belgrade disbanded the Kosovo parliament in 1989, took over the security forces and imposed a state of emergency rule which has continued ever since.

These events in Kosovo gave nationalist forces in Slovenia, Croatia and finally Bosnia the pretext they needed to organize their unilateral break from the Yugoslav federation. For the Serbian nationalists, the allegations of persecution of the Serbs in Kosovo became a theme which they promoted in both Croatia and Bosnia, which also had large Serbian minorities.

Renewed upheavals in Kosovo not only have the potential of reigniting these civil wars but pose the sharp danger of spreading military conflict throughout the region. Today Albanians make up 90 percent of Kosovo's 2 million people. The territory borders on the former Yugoslav republic of Macedonia, where Albanians form at least one quarter of the population and where ethnic-based politics have led to growing tension. West of Kosovo lies Albania itself, which has yet to recover from the economic collapse and armed uprisings which broke out barely one year ago.

Any major conflict pitting Serbs and Macedonian Slavs against Albanians over an attempt to redraw borders along ethnic lines also poses the danger of drawing in the region's traditional antagonists, Greece and Turkey. Greece has maintained an economic blockade against Macedonia, while Turkey has expressed its sympathies for the predominantly Moslem Albanian population in the former Yugoslav republics.

The clashes in Kosovo prompted emergency meetings of both NATO and the European Union together with threats to tighten sanctions against the Belgrade regime. Neither Washington nor the European powers are prepared, however, to support the demand of Kosovo's Albanians for independence. A Kosovo republic, proclaimed by the Democratic League of Kosovo, the main Albanian party led by Ibrahim Rugova, has been

recognized only by Albania, and even this was done as a limited gesture.

Washington's diplomacy has been founded since the beginning of the Yugoslav crisis on two supposed principles: the right of the former Yugoslav republics to self-determination and the integrity of the state borders of these republics. In reality, this policy has merely promoted the savage form of civil war dubbed "ethnic cleansing." Making the borders of the republics correspond to the striving for "self-determination" by the various ethno-chauvinist leaderships which have taken control has meant either the massacre or mass expulsion of ethnic minorities from disputed territories.

Expressions of hatred by Kosovo Albanians for the Milosevic regime were joined this week with anger toward Washington. On the eve of the Serbian counterinsurgency operation Robert Gelbard, the senior US envoy to the Balkans, visited Pristina, where he denounced the Kosovo Liberation Front as a "terrorist organization." The remark has been widely interpreted as a green light for the Serbian repression.

Washington had begun a shift in its policy toward Belgrade in recent weeks, expressing gratitude for Milosevic's support of a new Bosnian Serb government which is more accommodating to US demands. This Bosnian Serb faction apparently also enjoys close business connections with Milosevic and his ruling circle in Belgrade. Gelbard had indicated that the US would consider ways to ease some of the international sanctions which remain in effect against the rump Yugoslav state and would provide increased aid to the Republika Srpska, the Serb-ruled portion of Bosnia-Herzegovina.

As the new confrontation began to take shape in Kosovo, the US and NATO signaled their intention to keep ground troops in Bosnia through the rest of this year. The "peace-keeping" mission was to have ended in June. The force will be maintained at its present strength of some 31,000 soldiers. Pentagon officials, including Army Gen. Wesley Clark, who commands NATO troops, told congressional hearings that the cease-fire in Bosnia remains precarious and that elections scheduled for September could spark renewed conflict.

Meanwhile, the US continues to deploy hundreds of US combat troops in Macedonia, near the border with Kosovo. Ethnic Albanian leaders have repeatedly

demanding that "peace-keeping" forces be sent into Kosovo itself.

The Kosovo events raise the specter not only of another bloody ethnic conflict in the former Yugoslavia, but a regional war which would quickly draw the US military into the fighting. Such a US intervention will only exacerbate the Balkan crisis. If the tragic events of the past decade have demonstrated anything, it is the inability of capitalism to provide any solution to the spiraling confrontations between rival nationalist factions.

The resurgence of ethnic-based nationalism in Yugoslavia was itself the product of capitalist restoration. Sections of the old Stalinist bureaucracy--Milosevic in Serbia, Tudjman in Croatia, Izetbegovic in Bosnia, Kucan in Slovenia--worked to divert popular anger over rising unemployment and plummeting living standards brought on by "market reforms."

A decade later, conditions for the masses of working people throughout the former Yugoslavia continue to deteriorate while the ex-bureaucrats, allied with Mafia-like gangsters and foreign capital, have enriched themselves through war and the looting of the old nationalized economy.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact