

Crisis in Kosovo intensifies

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Three months after the Kosovo peace deal brokered by US representative Richard Holbrooke and Yugoslavian President Slobodan Milosevic, the threat of war in the Balkans looms once again.

NATO is threatening Serbia with military attack and has stationed massive air and marine forces, including the US aircraft carrier *Enterprise*, in the Adriatic. The period between ordering an assault and its execution has been reduced from 96 to 48 hours.

The deployment of ground forces is also under discussion. On Tuesday, US Secretary of State Madeleine Albright said for the first time that Washington might agree to send ground troops to Kosovo.

The immediate cause for the military escalation is the massacre of Albanian civilians in the village of Racak, said to have been carried out by units of the Serbian police on January 15. OSCE (Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe) observers and journalists uncovered many bodies--the figures vary between 37 and 45--dressed in civilian clothes and lying in a roadside ditch.

According to representatives of the Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA) they were villagers who had been arrested by the Serbs, taken away and executed in cold blood. This explanation was given extensive coverage in the world media. It was supported by the leader of the OSCE mission in Kosovo, US diplomat William Walker, who publicly accused the Serbian leadership of committing a "crime against humanity".

The Serbian government vehemently contested this account. It claimed that the dead were victims of the KLA, or KLA people killed in action, dressed in civilian clothes and then dumped at the roadside.

Both the French and British press published certain inconsistencies which could give rise to doubts over whether the dead in Racak were really victims of a massacre. What is not in doubt is that the day before the bodies were uncovered, there had been violent clashes between Serbian units and KLA fighters in the vicinity of the village. After the fighting ended, OSCE observers and journalists visited the village without finding any signs of a massacre. The bodies were only discovered 12 hours later, leaving sufficient time for any possible deception to be arranged.

The conflict intensified when the Serbian government expelled Walker, accusing him of acting as judge and jury with his accusations and thus exceeding his OSCE mandate. Last Thursday, under massive international pressure, the Serbs rescinded the expulsion order.

Regardless of the questions about the events in Racak, one thing is clear: the attempt to resolve the conflicts in Kosovo on the basis

of the Holbrooke-Milosevic initiative of October 12 has failed miserably. This agreement envisaged autonomy for the region within the framework of the Serbian state. The Kosovo-Albanians were to get their own education system, their own administration and police, and elect their own political representatives. Also, the province was to be permitted to send its own representatives to the Yugoslavian federal assembly, a right up to now reserved for the republics of Serbia and Montenegro.

The Serbian police force in Kosovo was to be reduced to the level existing before the fighting broke out in February 1998. Following the elections and three years of negotiations, the final status of Kosovo would then be decided.

The Serbian side only signed the agreement following a massive military threat from NATO, involving hundreds of fighter aircraft and several heavy bombers. The KLA, which had been all but defeated militarily and devoid of ammunition and heavy weapons, submitted because the deal provided them with a breathing space. However, neither side truly accepts the agreement.

For Serbia, control over Kosovo Polje, the fertile basin and scene of Serbia's historic defeat at the hands of the Turks in 1389, is a central part of Serbian national mythology that the political elite in Belgrade will not relinquish. As in other eastern European countries, a narrow layer of former Stalinist bureaucrats, black marketeers, war-profiteers and the nouveaux riches have accumulated enormous wealth, while the broad majority of the population are sinking into poverty and unemployment. Nationalism is the only thing that continues to bind together this deeply divided society. If all that is on offer to people is hate-filled chauvinism, then politics becomes increasingly dependent on irrational, fascistic and criminal elements. The actions of the Serbian police force in Kosovo have made this transparent.

Characteristic of the fact that all Serbian politicians--whether ex-Stalinists, "liberals" or conservatives--have flocked to the banner of nationalism when faced with growing social polarisation is Vuk Draskovic's switch into the camp of Milosevic. Draskovic, who two years previously was heralded as a leading figure of the "democratic" opposition alliance "Zajedno", has since risen to become vice-president of Yugoslavia.

The Kosovo Liberation Army has used the enforced cease-fire to stage a spectacular comeback. They now possess new weapons--modern rifles with ammunition that can pierce some tanks' armour plating, mortars up to 120 millimetres and up-to-date anti-tank arms. They have improved the military training and organisation of their several thousand fighters and possess a firm base in neighbouring Albania from which to stage their operations. Following the agreed partial withdrawal of Serbian troops from

Kosovo, the guerrillas moved in. Serbia only controls the borders, main highways and towns of Kosovo.

The KLA has never relinquished its aim of establishing an independent Albanian state in Kosovo and the neighbouring region. Its strategy consists, on the one hand, of "cleaning" the rural areas of any remaining Serbian inhabitants by threats, abductions and murder and, on the other hand, provoking the Serbian security forces through small-scale guerrilla attacks. The KLA is well aware that this provides new sustenance for Serbian nationalism, and that the civilian population must then suffer under the state's "fight against terrorism". Every massacre of the innocent, as in Racak, brings the KLA new supporters and leads to calls in the Western press and among politicians for military intervention.

The Swiss newspaper *Neue Zürcher Zeitung* wrote on January 15: "The radical Kosovo-Albanians now see the unique historical opportunity of shaking off Serbian rule and resolving the national question by establishing their own state. They want to use the favourable conditions, and are prepared to take any action, even if the realisation of their own state costs many dead and brings much destruction. Further escalation and the intervention of NATO will be in their interests."

The worsening of the conflict in Kosovo poses a difficult dilemma for the Western powers. Following the events in Racak, calls for a massive military blow against Serbia are increasing, even if this means an independent Kosovo. The conservative *Frankfurter Allgemeine* newspaper wrote on January 21, "The West will have to come to terms with the fact that in the long term an independent Kosovo cannot be prevented. Milosevic, the Balkan Saddam, has done enough to ensure this."

Others--many from within the military--warn of the consequences of such a step. US Defence Secretary Cohen and NATO Chief-of-Staff in Europe Wesley Clarke agreed that the West should not "provide the airforce" for the KLA. This guerrilla organisation, which traces its origins back to supporters of the Albanian regime of Enver Hoxha, is regarded as impenetrable and thus difficult to control.

As many observers warn, success for the KLA could plunge the entire region into new conflicts. This would threaten the break-up of Macedonia, whose West is largely populated by Albanians and which borders on both Kosovo and Albania. In the early 1990s there was an (unsuccessful) attempt to establish the "independent republic of Illyria". Historically, the state has always been a bone of contention for Bulgarian and Greek nationalists. The same applies to "Epirus", the border region between Albania and Greece.

The Dayton Accord could also come into difficulty, as the *Neue Zürcher Zeitung* article warned: "The secession of Kosovo from Yugoslavia could also mean the end of the state in Bosnia, only kept alive with difficulty. What arguments could then be used to stop the *Republika Serbska* from uniting with Serbia proper? And how would the destruction of a sovereign state be justified in international law? The consequences of ethnic separation could well mean new wars in Kosovo and Bosnia."

So far, practically all governments have rejected Albanian separatism. On the other hand, it is no longer possible to leave the

conflict to itself. The fact that an organisation like the KLA was able to become a significant political and military factor shows the scale of bitterness, desperation and hatred that exists. Therefore the calls for ground troops to be sent into Kosovo grow ever louder.

"Amidst the wringing of hands and the rattling of sabres, there is only one solution," the *SÄddeutsche Zeitung* writes, "NATO bombs Milosevic back to the negotiating table, and credibly threatens the KLA to leave them to their fate, that is Serbian fury, if they show no willingness to negotiate. Then we will see Dayton II. Afterwards, and even more importantly, dispatch tens of thousands of NATO troops into Kosovo and send the OSCE observers home with thanks. These troops must have a mandate of subduing both the KLA and the Serbians, through force of numbers making a civil war impossible. Even if this means staying five, ten or even twenty years--look at the UN presence in Cyprus or the Lebanon."

Such a military operation would have quite a different character from what happened in Bosnia, taking place without the agreement of the conflicting parties and on the territory of a state--Serbia--which would find itself in conflict with NATO. Nevertheless, both the British and German governments have let it be known that, under certain circumstances, they could support such an endeavour. What remains unclear is who would bear the enormous costs and risks, and whether the US would be prepared to participate.

If such an intervention came about, the Red-Green coalition government in Bonn would be the first German government since the Second World War to send German troops into battle. And this in a region where Hitler's army committed some of its worst crimes. Such an intervention, rather than resolving anything, would merely cement the conflicts in place and provide further sustenance to nationalist sentiments that have played such a terrible role in the Balkans in the recent past.



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