

Kosovo peace talks

The failure of the Rambouillet conference

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The Kosovo conference held at Rambouillet, near Paris, came to an end on Tuesday without any tangible results. Despite massive pressure on the part of the United States, Britain, France, Germany, Italy and Russia, neither of the two parties to the conflict agreed to the demands of the "Contact Group". These had proposed a wide-ranging autonomy for Kosovo within the framework of the Serbian state. This was to be secured through the stationing of a 28,000-strong "peace force" under the umbrella of NATO.

Although the Serbian delegation declared its acceptance of the political part of the plan--the rules for establishing an autonomous Kosovo, "subject to a few small amendments"--it rejected the stationing of NATO troops. This was regarded as an infringement on Serbian sovereignty. In the end, they merely consented to discuss "an international presence in Kosovo"--a formulation that permits the widest possible reading but cannot be interpreted as agreement to the stationing of troops.

For their part, the Kosovar Albanian delegation were not prepared to relinquish their demand for a referendum to be held on the independence of Kosovo. This is not only rejected by Belgrade, but also by the Contact Group. They fear that the formation of an independent state in Kosovo could destabilise the whole region and create new conflicts. This could have an explosive effect, especially in neighbouring Macedonia, where there is a strong Albanian minority, and in Albania itself, torn as it is by civil war.

At the end of the conference, the foreign ministers of the Contact Group spoke of "partial success". They announced that the participants would reconvene on March 15 to reach a final conclusion. According to most commentators this is "little more than a barely concealed admission of failure", as the Swiss paper *Neue Zürcher Zeitung* put it. It is indeed hard to see how the deep-going differences are to be overcome over the next three weeks. Everything points to a new round of violent confrontation.

The Rambouillet conference came about as a result of military threats. On January 15, massacre victims were discovered in the Kosovan village of Racak. NATO threatened the conflicting parties with air attacks if they did not attend the negotiations starting February 6, and reach a settlement by February 20. During the talks, the military pressure was increased. Some 430 aircraft were placed on combat alert, including German Tornados, American Stealth bombers and B-52s; a flotilla of warships armed with cruise missiles stood off the Yugoslavian coast.

The meagre outcome of the conference stands in remarkable contrast to the scale of these military threats.

The February 20 deadline passed without this concentrated military force being deployed. The talks were extended for three days, under the lead of US Secretary of State Madeline Albright. She commuted between the hostile delegations and strove to convince the Kosovar Albanians to give ground. Serbia would then be seen as the obstacle and force could be used to make them concede.

Her calculations did not work out. The negotiations took on an increasingly humiliating form for this representative of the world's mightiest military power. For hours, she pleaded with Hashim Thaqi, the 28-year-old leader of the Kosovar Albanian delegation to drop his rejectionist attitude. Finally, she even negotiated over the phone with Adem Demaci, a spokesman of the Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA), who had boycotted the conference and stayed in Pristina. Without success.

The reason is not only the Kosovar Albanian insistence on a referendum regarding independence. The partial solution of autonomy might have been acceptable, trusting to the logic of further events. But a more important obstacle was the refusal of the KLA to agree to the disarming of their units. They will only disband them under condition that they are recognised as the official police force in an autonomous Kosovo. In addition, the Albanian delegation was deeply divided. The prospect of future positions in government and administration, with their accompanying privileges and influence, did nothing to help bridge these divisions.

Albright received hardly any support from the European members of the Contact Group. They were working in the opposite direction, trying to get the Serbian side to give ground. They even offered Belgrade the lifting of economic sanctions in return. While Albright tried to create the conditions for a military intervention, the Europeans regarded this as simply the threat of last resort, whose use should be avoided if at all possible.

Russia was strictly opposed to any military intervention and made clear that it would regard any attack by NATO as a serious affront directed against its own interests. The Russian Foreign Minister even warned that an attack on Serbia could lead to a "Vietnam in the Balkans".

The second deadline of February 23 came and went without any decision being reached. The conference failed not only due to the contradictions between the Serbs and Kosovar Albanians, but also

as a result of the disagreements inside the Contact Group. Many commentators thought that the differences of opinion did not come out more sharply only because Albright did not want to endanger the upcoming summit commemorating the fiftieth anniversary of NATO.

While the US is mainly interested in defusing the conflict in the Balkans, and has demonstrated few scruples in its choice of methods to achieve this end, the Europeans fear the consequences of military escalation. They calculate this could unleash an even greater exodus of refugees into the West. Moreover, souring relations with Russia would have unfavourable results for neighbouring eastern European countries that have applied to join the European Union in the not too distant future.

However, the failure of Rambouillet has not removed the danger of a military intervention.

In Kosovo, the storm clouds are gathering. According to American Secret Service sources, Serbia has concentrated an additional 6,500 troops on the Kosovo border, along with 250 tanks and 90 artillery pieces. The KLA have also stepped up military action. Last Monday intensive fighting drove 4,000 civilians from their homes, the highest recent figure. The KLA are trying to incite the Serbs into mounting a brutal counter-offensive, so as to provoke NATO into intervening, without having to concede to any of their demands.

NATO forces remain on combat alert. In official circles and in the press in NATO countries the pure frustration at the fiasco in Rambouillet has unleashed increasingly strident calls: "Enough is enough. Just send the bombers in!" In the nineteenth century, the German military strategist Clausewitz described war as the continuation of politics by other means. Today, it is increasingly a substitute for any rational policy at all.

The actions of the Great Powers in the Balkans has always been characterised by a complete ignorance of the social and political problems of the region, which lie at the heart of the nationalist frenzy and ethnic cleansing. Here the social question is inseparably linked to the national question.

The disintegration of Yugoslavia and the restoration of capitalist property relations has largely destroyed the existing economic structures and pitched the mass of the population into bitter misery. In former Yugoslavia, real wages have sunk to the level of 1959, unemployment stands at 26 percent, and one in five of those working receives no pay.

At the same time, a layer of nouveaux riche, war profiteers and semi-criminals has been washed to the surface, now setting the political tone. They are consciously playing the nationalist card. On the one hand, to try and gain an economic advantage over their rival nationalist cliques, and on the other, to divert the desperation of the masses into fratricidal channels.

The policy of the Great Powers has continuously supported and encouraged this development. This began with the recognition of the separation of Croatia and Slovenia in the name of "national self-determination". In this, Germany played a leading role. When this plunged Bosnia into a civil war and a wave of bloody reprisals ensued--as more far-sighted observers had warned--the West began its military interventions. These were always aimed at strengthening one nationalist clique against another--Tudjman

against Milosevic, Izetbegovic against Karadic, and so on--fanning the chauvinist flames instead of quenching them.

The Dayton Accord then established a "peace" which cemented and institutionalised the national antagonisms instead of overcoming them. The Balkans have been squeezed into a corset of petty states and cantons which preclude any rational economic development, perpetuating poverty and backwardness. The only areas of the economy that are still blossoming are smuggling and fencing stolen goods, and the profiteering from those seeking asylum abroad. If the billions that are presently squandered on the military policing this irrational penitentiary were spent on economic development, the nationalist spectre would rapidly disappear.

This policy is being continued in Kosovo. For years the Contact Group ignored the brutal suppression of the Albanian majority there, as they required Belgrade's support to implement the Dayton Accord. When the conflict intensified, they tried to forcefully impose a peace over the heads of those directly concerned. Such an endeavour must inevitably fail.

How cynically the Great Powers have behaved can be seen by comparing their attitude to the Kurds and the PKK. The fate of the Kurds and of the Albanians reveal many parallels; the later were even dubbed the "Balkan-Kurds" in the last century. Today the Kosovar Albanians, like the Turkish Kurds, live as a minority under a regime that brutally suppresses their democratic rights, their culture and their language. But whereas the Kosovar Albanians are supported and the KLA is accorded diplomatic representation, the Kurds are left to their fate and the PKK is persecuted as a terrorist organisation.

There are also many parallels between the KLA and the PKK. Both can trace their origins back to Maoist organisations; both rest on the armed struggle and take little cognisance of the civilian population. If anything, the PKK has recently shown itself somewhat more prepared to compromise and adapt than the KLA.

The only difference between the Turkish Kurds and the Kosovar Albanians is that the former stand in the way of NATO's interests, which regards Turkey as its foundation in the Middle East. The latter represent a useful means of pressuring the Serbian regime, presently regarded as an obstacle to Western domination of the Balkans. In both cases, there is not a trace of principle; it is purely a matter of naked interest.

Whoever hoped that the coming to power of governments throughout most of Europe that contained social democrats, Greens and former Communists would lead to a different policy regarding the Balkans has since been taught a lesson. A solution to the crisis in the Balkans is only possible if it accords with the social interests of those who are presently suffering there: the mass of working people. They must be united on the basis of their common class interests and won for the building of a socialist federation of the Balkans.



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