

Serbs and Roma flee KLA terror in Kosovo

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20 August 1999

Propaganda claims that the US-NATO war against Yugoslavia was conducted in a humanitarian effort to halt "ethnic cleansing" in Kosovo lie in tatters as Serbs and Roma (gypsies) continue to flee the province to escape harassment, intimidation, beatings and murder at the hands of the Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA).

As many as 170,000 Serbs of a pre-war population of 200,000 have left the province since the withdrawal of Yugoslav troops. Less than 7,000 Roma are estimated to remain of a population of 30,000 to 40,000. Most of those are confined to enclaves, surrounded by NATO's Kosovo Force (KFOR) troops and living in constant fear of KLA attack.

Speaking last week in the Kosovo capital Pristina, where the number of Serb residents has decreased from 40,000 to less than 2,000 in the past eight weeks, KFOR spokesman Major Jen Joosten described the atmosphere of intimidation. "Serbs cannot go to hospitals, shop, or even receive humanitarian assistance. There must be many of whose existence we are not even aware." After acknowledging that they cannot leave their homes for fear of violence he tried to excuse the failure of NATO's military to protect them. "Everything is being done to keep the Serbs here, but KFOR can't be on every street corner or in every house," he said lamely.

Head of the United Nations mission in Kosovo, Bernard Kouchner, revealed the extent of the KLA's campaign in a statement to an Athens newspaper this week. "In the future, I will not allow the homes of 10 or 15 Serbs to be burnt down every night, even if it means confrontation with the KLA. I have told [KLA leader Hashim] Thaci that my patience has run out." Kouchner, however, outlined no planned steps to halt the attacks on Serbs and other ethnic groups.

There have been a series of killings in Pristina. On June 23, for example, the bodies of three men were found in the basement of the economics' faculty of Pristina University. They were Milenko Lekovic, a Serb professor of economics, Miodrag Mladenovic, a Serb guard in the building, and Jovica Stamenkovic, a Serb waiter from the café in the faculty. They had been beaten with a blunt instrument before being shot.

Most of the Serbs remaining in the capital are the elderly and disabled who have no means of leaving or no place to go. Two elderly women were murdered in the first week of August; both were shot through the doors of their apartments. A Serb woman and her four-year-old child were reportedly shot on August 11. The woman staggered with her child to a KFOR checkpoint where she died, the child was taken to hospital.

On Monday, two Serb teenagers were killed and five other Serbs injured during a mortar attack on the village of Klokot, south-east of Pristina.

The US-based Human Rights Watch organisation released a report at the beginning of August, entitled "Abuses against Serbs and Roma in the new Kosovo", which documents an apparently coordinated campaign of abductions, beatings, house-burning and murders of Serbs and Roma by the KLA. In addition to the widely publicised killings in Gracko and Prizren, the report describes many other little known atrocities.

Researchers viewed the bodies of three Serbs killed on June 19 in the village of Belo Polje, near Pec. Villagers claim that 10 uniformed KLA soldiers entered the village and executed Radomir Stosic, aged 50, his uncle Steven Stosic, 60, and their friend Filip Kosic, 46. Each of the men

was killed by a shot between the eyes at point-blank range. According to the Serbian Orthodox Church in Pec, 30 Serbs were killed in the municipality during June and July.

KLA soldiers in the village of Pones in the Gnjilane municipality abducted six cowherds on June 19. The men were beaten and interrogated, and two of them—Momcilo Dimic, 60, and Cedomir Denic, 50—were later found dead. KFOR officers in the town of Obilic reported that eight Serbs have been killed there since early June in what are described as "organised attacks" in which "KLA units were implicated".

In the town of Lipljan, KFOR officers reported that a male Serb was decapitated in the middle of the busy town market on July 9, between 11 am and 3 pm. One week later, four grenade attacks were carried out against Serb homes in the town in the early afternoon, killing one person. The attacks were carried out within the space of one hour and at regular intervals.

Four elderly Serb men in the village of Slivovo were reportedly abducted and killed in the third week of June. Two Roma men, Bajram Berisha, 34, and Vesel Berisha, 24, were killed by unknown assailants in Mitrovica in late June. Three Roma are believed to have been murdered in the town of Djakovica and three families burned in their homes in the village of Dubrava, also in June.

Researchers also document the abduction, interrogation and torture of numerous Serb and Roma civilians—mostly elderly men. The purpose of abductions and beatings appears to be to terrorise people into leaving Kosovo, as most are subsequently released. Many victims exhibited extensive bruising and knife cuts when interviewed by Human Rights Watch researchers. Those reported abducted by the KLA but not released are "presumed dead".

The report describes the following testimony of 71 year-old S.B. as typical: "[KLA soldiers] grabbed me, brought me down to the cellar and took turns hurting me. There were several of them, all in uniform... While they were beating me, they insulted me, called me 'Chetnik,' and told me to leave forever."

House-burnings are a commonplace occurrence. Thirty Roma homes were torched in the Brekoc neighborhood of Djakovica within the space of three hours on July 12. Uniformed KLA soldiers told the families to leave their homes a few days before. The Roma neighbourhood in Pec was almost entirely looted and burned in late June.

Most Serb and Roma homes in the village of Slovinje suffered a similar fate, as did the local Orthodox Church. Other targets of arson include the Serb areas of the villages and towns of Lipljan, Magura, Dolac, Drenovac, Brestovik, Vitomira, Istok, Belo Pojle, Veric, Srbobran and Obilic. There has also been widespread burning and looting of former Serb and Roma areas of Pristina. Recent reports tally at least 200 villages and 41 Serbian churches have been destroyed since KFOR established control over the province.

Human Rights Watch observed: "The most serious incidents of violence... have been carried out by members of the KLA. Although the KLA leadership issued a statement on July 20 condemning attacks on Serbs and Roma, and KLA political leader Hashim Thaci publicly denounced the July 23 massacre of 14 Serb farmers, it remains unclear

whether these beatings and killings were committed by local KLA units acting without official sanction, or whether they represent a coordinated KLA policy..."

The report concluded: "The intent behind many of the killings and abductions that have occurred in the province since early June appears to be the expulsion of Kosovo's Serb and Roma population rather than a desire for revenge alone. This explanation is borne out by more direct and systematic efforts to force Serbs and Roma to leave their homes." It cites the fact that large numbers of Serbs and Roma report being directly warned by ethnic Albanians, under threat of violence, to leave Kosovo and never return.

In light of this evidence, US Secretary of State Madeleine Albright's declaration in Pristina on July 29 that "Never again will people with guns come in the night" in Kosovo, sounds like a cruel joke.

Like all of the nationalist militia groups in the Balkans, the KLA's program is based on ethnic separatism. Its aim over the past four years has been to sever Kosovo from the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, and establish an independent state as part of the long term goal of establishing an ethnically pure Greater Albania—encompassing Albania, Kosovo and the Albanian-populated areas of Macedonia and Montenegro. This program requires the expulsion of the non-Albanian population.

The Human Rights Watch report makes clear that the KLA has a history of attacks on minority ethnic groups. It states in part: "It is also important to note that the KLA has been linked to earlier abuses against Serbs, Roma and Kosovar Albanians during 1998 and during the first three months of 1999. Specifically, reports by the Humanitarian Law Center, the International Committee of the Red Cross, and Human Rights Watch's own research indicate that dozens of Serbs, and a smaller number of Roma and Albanians, were detained by the KLA between mid-1998 and March 1999. At least 130 Serbs went missing during this time and are presumed dead."

This assessment underscores the fact that a bitter civil war was raging in Kosovo between the Yugoslav army and the KLA in 1998 and early 1999, before NATO intervention. Both sides were engaged in destroying the lives and property of civilians from "opposing" ethnic groups. The US and NATO elected to support the KLA and bomb Yugoslavia, because it suited their own political, economic and strategic interests in the Balkans, not out of altruistic opposition to human rights abuses.

Since KFOR's occupation of Kosovo, the public position of US-NATO leaders has been to favour the creation of a "multi-ethnic" and "democratic" Kosovo. But their policy on the ground has been to turn a blind eye to the KLA expulsion of Serbs and Roma.

Human Rights Watch made the following assessment of the role of KFOR during the months of June and July. "KFOR's overall record on preventing the abduction, detention, and murder of Serbs and Roma is also poor. A KFOR officer in eastern Kosovo told a Human Rights Watch researcher that his unit did not even try to keep track of the abductions because of their frequency. In many cases, KFOR officers from all contingents expressed the view that the commission of such crimes was inevitable. Efforts by a Human Rights Watch researcher to report an incident of harassment in Ljubizda village on June 30 to the German KFOR contingent required multiple visits to local posts and then to the contingent headquarters in Prizren, where a civilian-military implementation cell officer appeared uninterested in the details of the case."

KFOR has dismissed warnings by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) that it may be necessary to evacuate the remaining Serbs in Kosovo. "It is not our policy to assist people to leave. That is their own decision and they must make their own way," KFOR spokesman Lieutenant-Colonel Robin Hodges said this week. But as UNHCR representative Dennis McNamara noted, the agency had experienced instances where it had chosen not to help people to leave

and they had then been killed.

Most of the Serbs remaining in Kosovo are concentrated in a few towns including Kosovo Polje, Dobratin, Gracinica, Velika Hoca, Gorazdevac, Orahovac and the section of Kosovo Mitrovica north of the Ibar river—the scene of recent clashes between KLA-inspired demonstrators and French KFOR troops.

Beginning on August 6, crowds of up to 1,000 Albanians, many of them young men wearing KLA scarves, have attempted to force their way across the Ibar bridge into the section of Mitrovica housing several thousand Serbs. French soldiers erected a barbed wire barrier across the bridge after three days of clashes that left several Albanians and one French soldier seriously injured. French Lieutenant Meriadec Raffray was in no doubt as to who organised the demonstrations, "The KLA leaders are only interested in keeping up the pressure," he told the media. "They want to provoke an incident."

Kosovo Mitrovica is a mining centre, some 20 miles north of Pristina, and has been a centre of ethnic tensions since the end of the war. The purpose of the demonstrations is firstly to further intimidate Serbs living in the town and to force them to leave, and secondly, to put pressure on the French troops. Demonstrators taunted the French soldiers with chants of "terrorists" and demanded, "French go back to France, Americans come here."

Speaking at a news conference on August 8, KLA political chief Hashim Thaci denied responsibility for the Mitrovica clashes and said the demonstrators "gathered by themselves." But he then went on to launch a tirade against French troops, accusing them of behaving in "an undemocratic way, and a very arrogant way." Thaci claimed that by protecting the Serb enclave, the KFOR contingent was violating the UN resolution authorising its presence and that it wished to divide Kosovo on ethnic lines. "Kosovo means Mitrovica and Mitrovica means Kosovo. We are not going to allow the separation of the city," he warned.

Thaci also denounced the Russian contingent on August 1, after its soldiers briefly detained KLA military commander Agim Ceku at a checkpoint for failing to produce a KFOR identity card authorising him to carry weapons and travel with an armed security detail. Thaci accused the Russians of a "premeditated political act" that "verifies our doubts about the ability of Russian troops to bring stability to Kosovo."

Since the withdrawal of Yugoslav Army units, the KLA has declared itself a "provisional government" and sought to establish political control of the whole province. It has taken over former state-owned property, requisitioned hotels, homes, apartments and vehicles and assumed local leadership positions. Aid agencies complain they must deal with the organisation to get anything done. "We talked to the mayor's office and we had to deal with the local police, but it was one and the same—KLA," said one Norwegian aid worker.

There are signs of tension between the Albanian nationalists and the KFOR forces. On August 7, KFOR troops raided a house where KLA "interior minister" Rexhep Selimi and others were meeting. They discovered weapons, ammunition, radio frequency scanners, and a very large quantity of German marks. They also discovered a number of identity cards labelled "Ministry of Public Order". The cards, signed by Selimi, authorised the bearer to carry weapons, confiscate property and make arrests.

NATO immediately issued a statement describing KFOR as the "sole legitimate armed force in Kosovo." It warned that "any attempt by any group to usurp this authority is not acceptable to the international community and will not be tolerated."

KFOR's actions and statements are not motivated by "humanitarian" concerns for the Serb and Roma refugees any more than the NATO bombing of Yugoslavia was a response to the plight of Albanians. Having spent billions to force the capitulation of Yugoslavia, and to occupy Kosovo as a long-term base of operations in the region, the major powers

have no intention of ceding control to the KLA.

NATO's plans for a virtual military protectorate in Kosovo are coming into collision with the KLA's political ambitions for an independent Kosovo and ultimately Greater Albania. In the past the KLA has proven a useful political tool for NATO, so much so that at the Rambouillet conference in February that set the stage for the war, the US elevated the KLA to the status of a legitimate participant. As far as the future is concerned, however, the only role that NATO has for the KLA is as a compliant and subordinate participant in its administration.

The Human Rights Watch report cited in this article may be found at:
<http://www.hrw.org/reports/1999/kosov2/>



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