Killings of Kosovans continue under NATO occupation at pre-war rate

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The International Crisis Group (ICG), a private strategy organisation chaired by former United States Senate Majority Leader George Mitchell, reported last week that approximately the same number of Kosovan civilians were being killed every week under NATO's military occupation as in the months preceding the March 1999 onset of the US-NATO war against Serbia.

The report issued by the Washington- and Brussels-based group stated: “The actual war may have stopped but the number of killings remains similar to the level that occurred before the NATO air strikes in March. During the two months preceding the air strikes, an average of 10-15 Serbs and a similar number of KLA soldiers a week were being killed in various attacks. By August an estimated 30 people a week were being killed in Kosovo. Two months on that figure remains roughly the same."

The ICG's assessment, which has received little publicity in the Western media, constitutes a staggering exposure of the humanitarian pretences which the NATO powers have used to justify their 10-week bombardment of Serbia and subsequent occupation of Kosovo. The same level of killing which last winter was portrayed as a human rights catastrophe that branded Serbia as an outlaw state and morally justified, indeed demanded, military retaliation against the Serb population, continues today under the rule of NATO, with barely a mention by the Western governments that prosecuted the war and the media organisations that promoted it. Needless to say no media charges of ethnic cleansing and war crimes in Kosovo are being laid at the feet of Washington and its NATO allies. Nevertheless, the figures reported by the ICG, whatever that organisation's intentions, reveal the cynicism and hypocrisy of American and European policy in the Balkans.

The ICG report cannot be dismissed as a piece of pro-Serbian propaganda. The organisation is funded by the European Union, the US government and 13 other governments. It includes on its board of trustees former French Prime Minister Michel Rocard, former Australian Prime Minister Malcolm Fraser, former Israeli Prime Minister Shimon Peres, the former Prime Ministers of Belgium and Hungary, other former high-ranking officials and George Soros, the well-known international financier.

Far from opposing the NATO war and military occupation, the ICG cites the evidence of violence and political instability in Kosovo to argue for a stronger NATO troop presence and further intervention against Serbia “to foster stability in the entire region”.

The picture of Kosovo under NATO occupation presented by the ICG is a far cry from the image of an emerging multi-ethnic democracy which the West would like to project. The ICG states, "In the four months since the arrival of the peacekeepers, a multi-ethnic society is far from reality. Indeed, the population is becoming more segregated by the day.”

The transformation of the US-backed Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA) into a 5,000-strong Kosovo Protection Corps is "unlikely to halt the rising tide of violence and crime in Kosovo, or to stem the continued exodus of the province's few remaining non-Albanians," the report says. Rather, it has “enhanced the sense of fear and isolation in the Serb community”.

According to the ICG an estimated 170 Serbs have been killed since the arrival of NATO in June, whilst another 100,000 have fled the province. The "systematic attacks upon the Serb population, and to a lesser degree upon other minority groups, suggests that at least some elements of the ethnic Albanian majority are determined to rid the province of all non-

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Albanians," the report declares.

Describing the type of violence being perpetrated, the document states, "In countless incidents since the return of the refugees, Serb-owned properties have suffered grenade attacks or been set alight, and individuals and groups of Serbs have been routinely kidnapped or murdered. The most notorious incident saw the massacre of fourteen Serb farmers in the village of Gracko on 23 July....

"Both the Roma and the Gorani [minorities] are accused by ethnic Albanians in general of being allies of the Serbs, and thus have also found themselves targets of revenge killings.... At the beginning of September KFOR troops found the bodies of a father, mother, daughter and an elderly woman from a Roma family shot dead in Gornji Dragoljevici in western Kosovo."

The report suggests a number of possible culprits for the daily tide of violence, including the KLA, "radicalised ethnic Albanians", "criminals from Albania proper", "participants in internal ethnic Albanian conflict" and Serbian paramilitaries still active in the province. It notes: "The Roma questioned allege that the KLA run secret prisons in which Roma, Serbs and some Albanians are held. They say that these prisons are located in abandoned houses and factories and at local KLA headquarters."

Drawing attention to the influx of Albanian Mafia elements into the province since NATO took over, it says, "Much of the violence in southern Kosovo appears to be linked to organised crime", including "intimidation and looting private property belonging to both Serbs and ethnic Albanians." The links between the KLA and the Albanian and European Mafia are well known, but the report essentially accepts as good coin KLA denials of such connections.

The ICG also cites mounting evidence that the KLA has "lashed out at political rivals." The anti-independence Reform Democratic Party of Albanians (RDPA), for example, claims that "six of its members were killed in Djakovica/Gjakove, two killed and ten reported missing in Mitrovica, nine disappeared in Pristina and twelve reported missing in Pec".

NATO itself recently reported that 379 people had been murdered since its forces took over Kosovo on June 12. Of these, 135 (35 percent of the total) were Serbs, despite making up just 5 percent of the Kosovar population. A further 145 (38 percent) were ethnic Albanians and 99 (26 percent) of unknown or other ethnicity.

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