

OSCE report paints devastating picture of conditions in Kosovo

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31 December 1999

An extensive report released earlier this month by the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) presents a chilling description of conditions in Kosovo in the aftermath of last spring's NATO bombing campaign.

Two-thirds of the report focuses, in graphic detail, on atrocities carried out by Serbian forces in Kosovo which were used to justify the NATO bombing and occupation. But the final third of the report, published as *Kosovo/Kosova—As seen, As Told Part II*, which covers the period from June to October 1999, provides a glimpse of the situation currently existing under NATO's occupation and the Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA) forces which it has placed in power.

The foreword notes that human rights violations are now being carried out by the KLA in Kosovo. According to the OSCE's Human Rights Division, these "include executions, abductions, torture, cruel, inhuman and degrading treatment, arbitrary arrests and attempts to restrict freedom of expression. House burnings, blockades restricting freedom of movement, discriminatory treatment in schools, hospitals, humanitarian aid distribution and other public services based on ethnic background, and forced evictions from housing recall some of the worst practices of Kosovo/Kosova's recent past."

The report's authors attribute these atrocities to "revenge" attacks. What really emerges from the incidents outlined, however, is that the KLA is engaged not only in "ethnic cleansing" but a political cleansing of all who oppose it—whether Serb, Roma or Kosovo-Albanian.

The Executive Summary: Findings of the Report reads:

"The report documents the decimation of the Roma community in many parts of Kosovo/Kosova, driven from their homes in fear of their lives. The Muslim Slav community, largely concentrated in the west of Kosovo/Kosova, may share the same faith as the Kosovo Albanians, but they are separated by language. To be a Serbo-Croat speaker in Kosovo/Kosova is to be a suspect and can be enough in itself to incite violence. Other non-Albanians that feature in the report as victims of human rights include the Turks and Croats."

The introduction notes that "Rights of Kosovo Albanians to freedom of association, expression, thought and religion have all been challenged by other Kosovo Albanians. The report reveals that opposition to the new order, particularly the (former) UCK's [KLA] dominance of the self-styled municipal administrations, or simply a perceived lack of commitment to the UCK cause, has led to intimidation and harassment."

The report is broken down into five districts, Gnjilane, Pec, Pristina, Mitrovica and Prizren. It describes a general state of lawlessness in which a criminal element thrives. In each case the KLA have set themselves up as self-styled administrators, punishing those whom it deems to have not supported their cause fully during or since the war. The KLA takes over the homes of those it forces to flee. In a number of cases, the victims are those Kosovo-Albanians who supported the United Democratic Movement (LDK), a more moderate Kosovan independence organisation and rival of the KLA.

The KLA was meant to be officially disbanded as of September 19. Many KLA members simply transferred over to NATO's Kosovo Protection Corps (TMK). The supposedly civilian force, charged with providing "emergency assistance and community services", became a new vehicle for KLA activity. The regional overviews detail criminal actions carried out by forces acting in the name of the KLA or the "provisional TMK".

An examination of just one district cited, Gnjilane, sets a pattern for the rest. As an area that suffered little damage during the war, Gnjilane had a large concentration of Kosovo Serbs with no strong KLA presence. The report notes that since the end of the conflict, "The descent into violence has been swift and widespread". It details the exodus of Kosovo Serbs either across the internal boundary into Serbia, or to enclaves within the province. "The Roma population has left *en masse*," the report states.

"In sharp contrast to the period before the conflict, there was a strong and highly visible UCK [KLA] presence in the Gnjilane/Gjilan area. The (now former) UCK took over many public buildings, claiming that this action was to prevent looting. One example of this was the occupation of a former boarding school, known as Internat, a building said to be used as a UCK detention facility."

There was a concerted drive by KLA forces to secure the dominance of Kosovo-Albanians in the province. "The violence had its greatest effects on the Kosovo Serb and Roma communities: large outflows of both were witnessed from early June onwards. In the period from 10th to 18th July, no day or night went by without a house burning somewhere in Gnjilane/Gjilan town."

These attacks were effective in achieving the aims of the KLA. At the beginning of July the village of Zitinje/Zitinje was 50 percent Kosovo Serb and 50 percent Kosovo Albanian. On July 1 the house of the former mayor was burned down. "On August 1, 330 Kosovo Serbs, including the former Mayor, left the village," the report notes.

Similar cases are reported for villages and towns throughout the region. The KFOR [NATO occupation force] summary for the Vitina/Viti area for August 1, 1999 stated: "Exodus of all Serb residents of Zitinje/Zitinje. Massive wave of looting follows. At least 80 homes burnt in the past week. Burning continues." According to one OSCE staff member, "after three weeks of fires, areas of the Gnjilane/Gjilan region resembled a war zone."

Members of the Roma community suffered some of the most brutal treatment at the hands of KLA forces. "On July 18, a Roma leader reported that his community had shrunk from 8,500 before the conflict, to just 130 people: no Roma were left in Ogoste/Ogoshete, few remained in Koretin/Koretin, Roma were starting to leave Berivojce/Berivojce," the report states.

Prior to the conflict there were approximately 4,825 Roma living in the Gnjilane region. After the conflict there were only 875 remaining. These were mainly elderly women, single people, children and disabled people. In one area of the city of Gnjilane "approximately 90 percent of Roma

houses were burned within a three week period. Since June 27 a total of 135 houses have been burned in Gnjilane/Gjilan, the majority belonged to Roma.”

Interviews taken by the OSCE, United Nations humanitarian operatives and KFOR leave little doubt that the attacks on the Roma people were instigated by the KLA. The report cites a statement from a 17-year-old Roma male who had been abducted June 26 “by individuals wearing camouflage uniforms and (at least one) UCK insignia.”

One passage highlights the appalling conditions facing Roma people after the war. It notes that UN officials “identified a small group of Roma, consisting of nine families with a total of 45 members, living in the outskirts of Gnjilane/Gjilan in the ‘Cenar Qeshme’ area in very poor conditions. They claimed not to have received food from the Mother Teresa Society since the end of the conflict and ‘were obviously living partly on garbage from the nearby disposal area.’ The families had asked for KFOR protection after two of the males had been ill-treated and detained by Kosovo Albanians who instructed them to leave their homes.”

The report makes clear that the purpose of the house burnings and harassment of minority communities was the ethnic cleansing of whole areas: “House fires led to major population flows and the ethnic cleansing of whole villages. The trend of attacks on individuals and small groups exerted constant pressures on those who survived the initial explosion of violence. In some cases, these individuals had a clear demographic profile suggestive of very specific targeting and careful organisation.”

Those who remained after such intimidation were likely to be killed. The report details several incidents in which Serbs were killed by Kosovo Albanians, before noting: “The fact that the July, August and September cases occurred in clusters is suggestive of a degree of planning, or of cells operating at certain times in certain areas, and the September cases in particular are suggestive of the organised targeting of a specific group.”

In the aftermath of the NATO bombing, exaggerated media reports of mass graves containing the bodies of Kosovo Albanians were cited as justification for the aerial bombardment of a civilian targets. No attention was paid to evidence of KLA atrocities during the war. The report states:

“On July 24 OSCE was notified of the discovery of a grave near Pdgradje/Pogragje and visited the site. OSCE documented the site which included visible body parts (feet, buttocks) and empty cartridge cases. An ICYT team arrived to exhume the bodies during the week of August 6. 11 bodies were found in the grave. Two additional bodies were discovered on August 6 in the river near to the gravesite.”

KLA involvement is inferred from the fact that “a house in the nearby village of Ugljare/Uglare ... was used as an alleged UCK detention facility. OSCE visited the house and observed walls in the cellar that appeared to have been painted with oil in an attempt to mask bloodstains.”

It is clear from the report that the KLA has utilised the NATO offensive and the expulsion of the Serb security forces to establish their political and economic control of the region. Whatever their “legal” role under the terms drawn up by NATO, the KLA continue as an armed presence, carrying out arbitrary arrests, torture and murder of those deemed to be in opposition.

The report sums up the KLA involvement in the Gnjilane region as follows:

“Again the trend was apparent immediately: on June 19, a Kosovo Serb male was ill-treated during an unlawful detention in Koretin/Koretin by four or five alleged UCK members. The victim was released on June 22 with cuts on his face and broken teeth. Also on June 19, five Kosovo Albanian civilians wearing green camouflage uniforms with UCK insignia stopped a Kosovo Serb man in the street in daylight hours and forced him to hand over money. On June 28, a UCK insignia was placed on the shop of a Kosovo Serb: the shop was also looted and the owner ill-treated by perpetrators wearing UCK uniforms. UCK involvement in June was much in evidence: every report of ill-treatment from June 19 to July 1 alleged

that the perpetrators were UCK. From early June, perpetrators in many cases claimed to work for the UCK/provisional TMK or were wearing UCK insignia or black or green camouflage. At times, perpetrators have said that they work for the UCK ‘police’.”

The KLA have also systematically suppressed political activity among Kosovo Albanians: “One target group appears to be LDK members. OSCE has received information that LDK members have been approached and told to stop their political activities in the Gnjilane area.... UCK alleged involvement is a consistent feature, particularly early on in the reporting period. Not only Kosovo Serbs, but Roma and Kosovo Albanians are subject to varying forms of harassment. While incidents involving Kosovo Serbs are the most acute, the general atmosphere of fear and intimidation resulting from arbitrary detention, ill-treatment and threats clearly has a chilling effect on Kosovo Albanian political parties, on minorities and on NGOs and will continue to do so.”

The sections of the OSCE report dealing with the industrial and social infrastructure of the Gnjilane region notes that the self-styled administrations appointed their own directors to head companies and public facilities. There is “much dissatisfaction among workers” but “these same people are afraid to talk about it”. Supporters of the KLA predominate, “all LDK members have been sidelined” and the “Kosovo Serb community report that they do not feel welcome to return to their jobs”.

The tobacco factory in Gnjilane is run by former LDK members and has the only management not apparently linked to the KLA. In March there were 592 workers at the factory, including 407 Kosovo Serbs and 185 Kosovo Albanians. The report states, “On September 27, the ‘director’ of the factory received a visit from two Kosovo Albanians claiming to be working for the UCK ‘Financial Police’ who asked to see the Company’s financial records in order to estimate taxes.” By the end of September there were just 215 workers, all Kosovo Albanians.

At the main hospital in Gnjilane, a hospital board was set up at the end of June composed of three Kosovo Albanians, two Kosovo Serbs and one KFOR representative. The report says of this body: “Opposition to the inclusion of the Kosovo Serb representatives was expressed frequently, and the final result was that on July 8 one was taken out of the hospital and beaten up. The following day, Kosovo Serb patients were denied access to the hospital and a few days later, a Kosovo Serb surgeon was beaten up and a Kosovo Serb technician abducted.”

Presently there are no Kosovo Serbs working at the hospital and Serb patients prefer to be hospitalised in Vranje, outside of Kosovo, rather than be treated by the Kosovo Albanian staff. The report notes “two cases in which Kosovo Serbs sent to Pristina/Prishtine Hospital died in allegedly ‘strange circumstances’.”

Out of the widespread social devastation, organised crime has become a growth industry. Shopkeepers and restaurants are blackmailed regularly, while “Shopkeepers who had bought their premises from real estate companies and businesses that were run by Kosovo Serbs are now being requested to buy the property again or to pay rent to the same real estate companies, now run by Kosovo Albanians.”

The report makes clear the scale of ethnic cleansing that has been carried out since the occupation of the area by KFOR troops. Prior to the conflict, the Kosovo Serb community in Gnjilane town was estimated at 5,982. At the end of July the Orthodox Church gave a figure of 4,000 and one month later of 3,400. The Kosovo Serb population on September 24 was estimated by the same body as 1,500.

So damning is the material contained in the report that the authors felt obliged to issue it with the following introduction:

“The purpose of publishing the two reports is to seek redress for the violations, both past and present, and to give the victims a voice. Publishing them in conjunction does not in any way suggest that the abuses of the past and the violations of today can be equated. *The sheer*

scale and the involvement of the State make the former of a structurally different order than the latter. From a human rights perspective, however we must give full accounting of both” (emphasis added).

It should be noted, however, that NATO's intervention established the KLA as the new state authority in the republic. It legitimised this on the grounds of the KLA's supposedly higher morality. In detailing the KLA's own criminal and racist activities, the OSCE report undermines official western justification for NATO's war against Serbia.



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