

The CARE-OSCE connection in Kosovo

New information on the case of two jailed Australian aid workers

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A current affairs program on the Australian government's Special Broadcasting Services television network last week shed some further light on Yugoslavia's detention of two CARE aid workers last year. Steve Pratt and Peter Wallace were arrested with two carloads of computer files, a satellite telephone and other communications equipment when they tried to cross into Croatia from Serbia last March 31—just seven days after the US-NATO bombing of the country began.

The SBS *Dateline* program belatedly disclosed two pieces of new information. The first was that CARE had a contract with the government of Canada, a NATO member, to recruit a team of monitors in Kosovo before the bombing. Under the arrangement, CARE Canada received \$A3.2 million from CIDA, Canada's official aid agency, to select and put in place 60 members of an Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) monitoring force. CARE paid the observers and provided them with orientation briefings, medical services and administrative backup.

Strictly speaking, the contract was with CARE Canada, but CARE Australia, as CARE's lead agency in Yugoslavia, approved it. In fact, Pratt, who was CARE International's country director in the former Yugoslavia, personally helped set up the operation. He accompanied CARE Canada's chief John Watson on a week-long tour when Watson arrived to establish the operation.

Dateline cited an unnamed OSCE source stating that the data collected by the monitors was supplied to NATO, but not, as was supposed to happen, to Yugoslavia. The program also interviewed CARE Canada's chief John Watson and Stephen Wallace from CIDA who admitted that ex-military people and others "with experience in combat zones" were recruited for the operation. In other words, Pratt was directly linked to a network full of ex-military personnel sending reports to NATO.

The second revelation came in an interview with CARE Australia chairman Malcolm Fraser, a former prime minister. Fraser admitted that the material that the two CARE workers tried to take across the border contained information on troop movements, tank positions and minefields. Fraser confirmed that the documents included "situation reports" written by Pratt in "military language".

When the CARE workers were detained, on suspicion of spying or passing on information that aided the NATO bombing, the Australian government, opposition politicians and the media denounced the arrests as an "outrage" and condemned the Yugoslav regime of Slobodan Milosevic. For weeks on end, headlines and editorials accused the Belgrade administration of using innocent humanitarian workers as political pawns.

As CARE's chief spokesman, Fraser was at the centre of the campaign. He loudly protested the complete innocence of the CARE staff, enlisting the support of dignitaries from UN Secretary General Kofi Annan to South African President Nelson Mandela. Fraser was appointed a Special

Envoy of the Howard government and eventually travelled to Belgrade to seek the prisoners' release.

The propaganda campaign only intensified when it was revealed that Pratt had been a Major in the Australian army, as well as a one-time election candidate for the conservative Liberal Party. It also emerged that he had previously worked for CARE in such sensitive locations as Rwanda and had apparently been forced to flee Kurdistan, in northern Iraq, as a suspected spy. The media barrage continued unabated even when the Yugoslav court decided not to rely upon Pratt's televised confession, broadcast on Yugoslav TV, that he had "performed some intelligence tasks in this country, using the cover of CARE Australia". The court ultimately dismissed the spying charges but convicted the pair of lesser offences of passing information to a foreign organisation.

Now Fraser has admitted that he and other CARE officials knew all along of highly incriminating evidence. Fraser claimed that he was not told about the Canadian contract until after Pratt and Wallace were detained. Nevertheless, as soon as he found out he insisted that the media suppress all mention of it. *Dateline* itself acknowledged that it had known of the Canadian contract since last June but did not report the information for seven months at Fraser's request.

The significance of the Canadian contract can only be understood by examining the true role of the OSCE monitoring operation. The *Dateline* program depicted it as a "peace-monitoring" effort that had been agreed to by the Yugoslav authorities. In fact, the Milosevic regime was forced to allow the OSCE to send 2,000 civilian monitors under the direct threat of NATO bombing, as well as crippling economic sanctions. Under an agreement imposed by US diplomat Richard Holbrooke on October 20, 1998, Milosevic pledged to withdraw Yugoslav security forces from Kosovo, where they had been sent earlier in 1998 to combat units of the Albanian separatist Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA).

The monitors had nothing to do with peace. They were to be deployed to police Yugoslavia's compliance with the agreement, backed by NATO surveillance flights. A NATO rapid reaction force was to be assembled to intervene in the event of a breach by Serbia.

Given the circumstances, it is inconceivable that the monitors did not include intelligence officers and agents. To the Serbian authorities this was obvious. Interviewed by *Dateline*, Deputy Information Minister Miodrag Popovic stated: "We knew all along about their intelligence activities. We knew all along about the real purpose of the OSCE mission and that was to justify later NATO aggression."

Appointed to head the OSCE force was William Walker, a US diplomat who was previously implicated in the Nicaraguan Contra affair in the 1980s. As a deputy to the Reagan administration's Assistant Secretary of State Elliott Abrams, Walker was involved in illegally supplying weapons to the Contras who were seeking to overthrow the Sandinista government.

The Milosevic-Holbrooke agreement provided the conditions for similar "dirty tricks" activity in Kosovo. The KLA, which had been suffering heavy losses at the hands of the Yugoslav army, was given the opportunity it needed to regroup, obtain fresh military equipment and step up its campaign to drive all Serbs from Kosovo.

As fighting flared between Serbian and KLA units, the OSCE monitors claimed to have evidence of widespread Serbian atrocities. Walker was at the centre of the main incident used to trigger the NATO bombing—the alleged killings of 45 Kosovar peasants by Serbian forces in the village of Racak on January 15, 1999. When the bodies were discovered, Walker was the first observer on the scene and immediately declared that there had been a Serbian massacre. On-the-spot reports in the French press, however, suggested that the 45 could have been KLA fighters killed in violent clashes with Serb units near the village the day before.

Racak, and the subsequent withdrawal of OSCE observers, provided the pretext for the Paris and Rambouillet conferences of February and March 1999 where the "Contact Group" of six nations demanded that Milosevic sign an Accord granting autonomy to Kosovo. Appendix B of the Accord required a full NATO occupation of Yugoslavia, also in the name of ensuring compliance. Milosevic refused to sign, objecting to the blanket infringement of Yugoslav's sovereignty, and the NATO bombing commenced just six days later.

In his interview, Fraser defended the OSCE operation but said that "with hindsight" it was a mistake for CARE to have participated in it, blurring CARE's humanitarian mission. In another part of the interview, which has received no comment in the media, he said the Rambouillet conference was used to prepare for war. "It was the West's decision to go to war, not Yugoslavia's and when I say the West's decision, there is a great deal of evidence to say that Rambouillet was organised to provide an excuse to go to war and I say that quite clearly and deliberately," he said.

Fraser's remarks provoked something of a storm within CARE. At one point, CARE's publicity manager Antony Funnell interrupted Fraser's interview, insisting that the CARE contract was with CIDA, not the Canadian government. Fraser responded furiously with a string of rebukes. "Do not interrupt when I am being interviewed and do not ever interrupt again," he thundered at one point. "Do you understand?"

Canadian CARE's John Watson told *Dateline* that Fraser's objections flowed from a "traditional" view of aid activity, whereas CARE Canada had "a more progressive view of humanitarian work". When Fraser criticised CARE Australia's national director Charles Tapp for not objecting to the Canadian contract, Tapp responded by saying there were similar Australian government contracts with many aid organisations in Bougainville, East Timor and Indonesia.

Aid agencies are used for such intelligence-gathering activities because they can place personnel on the ground in volatile areas where other observers would be under suspicion and scrutiny. As Pratt's record shows, their staffs often feature seasoned military operatives. Direct state funding of aid agencies to undertake such activities is a growing trend, as is overall dependence on government coffers. The Australian Council for Overseas Aid estimates that in 1998 government sources provided one-third of the \$218 million raised by its affiliates.

As limited as the SBS material was, it pointed to a number of unanswered questions about the CARE affair. Why was CARE asked to set up part of the OSCE monitoring force? What data did the OSCE compile and how was it used in the lead-up to the NATO bombing? What information did Pratt and his colleagues collate and to whom was it sent? Did their reports continue during the first week of the NATO onslaught?

This week, *Four Corners*, a flagship current affairs program on the other government-funded TV network, the Australian Broadcasting Corporation, attempted to divert public attention away from the SBS revelations. Instead of a serious investigative examination of the new evidence, it devoted its weekly timeslot to lengthy, uncritical and

sympathetic interviews with Pratt and Wallace. Every effort was made to pull on viewers' heartstrings. With a tender and commiserating expression, interviewer Liz Jackson dwelt on their traumatic experiences in detention, and their personal feelings. The SBS material was barely mentioned, and only at the end of the 45-minute program.

Jackson did not ask either Pratt or Wallace any of the obvious questions. Exactly what part did Pratt play in setting up and running the Canadian contingent of the OSCE operation? Why did Pratt keep detailed records of military movements? Why did he and Wallace stay in Yugoslavia after the bombing commenced and then seek to leave Serbia with two carloads of extremely sensitive material, including reports associated with the OSCE operation?

One new piece of information emerged showing that Pratt was no ordinary ex-army officer. Among the documents found in his possession was his military record of service between 1969 and 1992, revealing that before he left the army he had been appointed second-in-command of the United Nations Military Observer Team, on standby to deploy to the former Yugoslavia.

Rather than report and examine the documents carried by Pratt and Wallace, which have never been released to the public, *Four Corners* quoted just three snippets. In one, Pratt reported that "fighting continues in the strategically important area of Podujevo". In a situation report, he wrote: "Significant government forces, backed by about 12 VJ (army) heavy tanks and armoured cars, launched operations against known KLA strong points recently established in Podujevo." Both clearly relate to military operations, not aid work.

The third report, dated March 27, 1999, indicates that Pratt continued to send information to NATO-linked sources throughout the first week of bombing. "People are regularly moving into and out of air-raided shelters in the late afternoons and nights" in Belgrade, he reported, describing the tension in the city as "very high".

In his interview, Wallace claimed not to have known that Pratt had these reports with him when they tried to leave the country. "What we should have done before we'd gone out was sanitise the files, that is, to take out anything that might be provocative," he suggested. The information, he admitted, "wasn't strictly relevant to a humanitarian operation and our need to know where the security risks were".

Asked why he thought the material was there, Wallace paused awkwardly before saying: "Er, oh well, it's, um, just Steve's mistake". Suddenly the interview switched back to Pratt, who blithely declared that he was "comfortable" with the reports he had compiled.

Much remains hidden about the Pratt-Wallace affair, and not just in Australia. Little has appeared in the Canadian media about the CARE-OSCE connection and those reports that have appeared have added nothing to the original *Dateline* report. In both countries, and elsewhere around the world, aid agencies such as CARE continue to attract donations and support, mounting considerable advertising campaigns to portray themselves as purely humanitarian organisations.

Having had unwelcome attention drawn to the links between aid agencies and the intelligence services, considerable official and media effort is being made to prevent serious questions being asked. But what has emerged already is a high-level coverup, led by Fraser and the Australian government, assisted by the media, to suppress the facts about the use of CARE for intelligence gathering in the Balkans.



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