Forensic report throws doubt on US/NATO claims of Racak "massacre"

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A forthcoming article by three Finnish pathologists throws further doubts upon official descriptions of a “massacre” in the Kosovan village of Racak in 1999.

An advance copy of the article, obtained by the *World Socialist Web Site*, to be published in *Forensic Science International* at the end of February, has rekindled suspicions that the Racak events were portrayed as the mass execution of innocent Kosovar Albanians by the US in order to push its NATO allies into support for the war against Serbia.

Washington proclaimed the discovery of some 40 bodies in Racak as proof positive of a “crime against humanity” committed on the orders of Serbian leader Slobodan Milosevic. The Racak “massacre” played a central part in justifying NATO's war against Serbia. As an article in the *Washington Post* noted, “Racak transformed the West's Balkan policy as singular events seldom do. The atrocity .... convinced the administration and then its NATO allies that a six-year effort to bottle up the ethnic conflict in Kosovo was doomed.”

On March 19, 1999, President Bill Clinton told the world's press, “We should remember what happened in the village of Racak back in January, innocent men, women and children [the pathologists' report shows only one of the dead was aged under 15, and only one was a woman—RT] taken from their homes to a gully, forced to kneel in the dirt, sprayed with gunfire—not because of anything they had done, but because of who they were.” Five days later NATO planes, headed by the US, began bombing Belgrade.

The American William Walker, who was OSCE (Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe) chief in Kosovo in 1999, played a central role in Washington's propaganda offensive to gain support for Western military intervention. Walker claimed those killed in Racak were unarmed villagers who had been shot at close range. He said many of the bodies showed signs of being deliberately disfigured. News broadcasts around the world carried pictures of the dead lying in a shallow gully.

His allegation that a “crime against humanity” had been committed was echoed by the leader of a team of Finnish pathologists, who were in Kosovo on behalf of the European Union as part of an investigation into a number of other sites where bodies had been found. This team was asked to perform autopsies on the Racak dead.

On March 17, 1999, just a week before the NATO bombing of Yugoslavia began, the leader of the EU Forensic Experts Team (EU-FET), Dr. Helena Ranta, told a press conference in the Kosovan capital Pristina, that a “crime against humanity” had been committed in Racak. Furthermore, Dr. Ranta insisted, “there were no indications of the people being other than unarmed civilians.”

In contrast to the official claims that the bodies discovered in Racak were the victims of a mass execution of peaceful Kosovan Albanian villagers carried out by Serbian security forces, the article in *Forensic Science International* explicitly says: “Determination of reasons for events, their political and moral meanings, or the connection of victims to political or other organisations are questions which lie beyond the scope of forensic science.”

The article also notes that “The EU-FET was unable to confirm the chain of custody, concerning the localisation of the victims at the site of the incident and their transportation to the institute of forensic medicine in Pristina. Thus, the Finnish team could not confirm that the victims were from Racak. The course of events prior to victims being brought to the autopsy was also not confirmed by the EU-FET.”

The pathologists found only six bodies had suffered a single gunshot wound, with most being covered in multiple wounds. The trajectories showed the bullets

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coming from many different angles and elevations. Very few of the dead appeared to have been shot at close range. And in contrast to the claims by Walker, no evidence of deliberate disfigurement of the bodies was found.

These findings would tend to support those eyewitnesses who reported that there had been violent clashes between Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA) forces and Serbian units near Racak the day before the bodies were found, and that the dead may have been killed in this firefight. OSCE observers and journalists who visited the village immediately after the fighting did not report finding any signs of a massacre and the 40 bodies were only discovered some 12 hours later.

The Serbian authorities denied their forces had carried out any executions in Racak, and said the bodies could well be those of dead KLA fighters. Dr. Sasa Dobricanin, a Yugoslavian pathologist who worked alongside the Finnish team, told the press, “Not a single body bears any sign of execution.”

Although the precise circumstances of how those in Racak came to be killed are still unclear, there are compelling political reasons for at least considering an alternative scenario to that presented by NATO and the US. Not least of these is American support for the KLA and Albanian separatists, who were engaged in violent guerrilla actions against Serbian police and army posts in Kosovo.

To bring NATO directly into the conflict it was necessary to scuttle the Rambouillet peace talks and overcome scepticism in the KLA, particularly among America's European allies. Presenting the Racak killings as a deliberate Serbian atrocity would have precisely this aim.

This was particularly key in Germany, where the West's war against Iraq in 1991 had unleashed a sizeable protest movement. There the Racak killings provided a “humanitarian” justification for military intervention abroad by German troops for the first time since World War Two. Green party leader and Foreign Minister Joschka Fischer called for German soldiers to participate in the attack on Yugoslavia, saying “Racak was the turning point for me.”

Copies of the full report by the EU-FET team were handed over to the German government, which at that time held the EU presidency, and to the International Criminal Tribunal for Yugoslavia (ICTY), where the Racak killings still form part of the ICTY indictment of Milosevic.

If the Racak killings were a deception, aimed at eliciting Western support for the KLA, it would not be the first time that such a subterfuge has been employed in the Balkans. Dozens were killed in January 1995 when a mortar shell landed in a crowded market square in the Muslim-controlled sector of Bosnia's capital Sarajevo. This tragedy, blamed upon Serbian forces, was used to reverse Western policy in Bosnia, eventually leading to its occupation by a mixed US and European force. A later investigation by the UN concluded from the trajectory of the mortar shells that they had most likely been fired from Muslim militia positions overlooking Sarajevo.

The full report by the Finnish pathologists remains under lock and key to this day.

An interview broadcast by Germany's main television channel with Dr. Helena Ranta indicates the pressure placed on her at the time to go along with charges that a “crime against humanity” had taken place. She told ARD that she was “conscious that one could say that the whole scene in this small valley was arranged. Because this is actually a possibility. This conclusion was included in our first investigation report, and also in our later forensic investigations, which we made in November 1999 directly in Racak. And we passed on this conclusion directly to the Court of Justice in The Hague. [OSCE representative] Walker came to Racak on Saturday, and it was his personal decision to speak about a ‘massacre'. I systematically avoided using this word.”

“Racak was at that time a stronghold of the KLA. I am convinced that there is enough information in order to establish that armed engagements between the Serbian army and the KLA took place there. There is no doubt about this. Moreover, I was told, and I was also able to read the information myself about the fact that KLA fighters were killed there on this day.”

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