

Kosovo protectorate “on point of near collapse” after March riots

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A leaked internal United Nations report says the administration in the UN protectorate of Kosovo was on “the point of near collapse” after riots engulfed the province in March.

The wave of communal violence resulted in a level of ethnic cleansing that matched anything seen in the Balkans during the break-up of the former Yugoslavia. The clashes began in the ethnically divided town of Mitrovica and quickly spread across the province—suggesting they were part of a coordinated operation. As a result, 19 people were killed and hundreds injured. More than 4,000 people—mainly Serbs—were forced to flee. Nearly 1,000 houses, mostly Serb-owned, and 36 Orthodox churches, monasteries and monuments were destroyed or damaged.

Most of Kosovo’s 2 million people are ethnic Albanians, but there are also about 100,000 Serbs remaining. Nearly all the 850,000 Albanians who left when NATO bombing started in 1999 have returned, but only 5,800 of the approximately 200,000 non-Albanians who fled have done so. These refugees are mostly Serbs, but also include several thousand Roma, Ashkaeli, Bosniaks, Gorani and Egyptians.

The numbers who fled the riots in March are about the same as those who returned to Kosovo during the whole of 2003.

The administration blamed Kosovar nationalist politicians and the media for sparking off the riots by sensationalising the drowning of three Albanian boys. A fourth boy who survived said Serbs with dogs had chased them into a river in revenge for the shooting of a Serb teenager earlier. The daily newspaper *Dan* reported recently that the Hague war crimes tribunal will soon indict three Kosovo Albanian leaders, one of whom is believed to be Kosovo Protection (KPC) Commander, General Imri Ilazi.

Ilazi lead a group of several thousand Kosovar Albanians from the Gnjilana area during the riots, setting fire to Serb homes.

The western powers have failed to solve the political and economic crisis in Kosovo, but have instead produced a humanitarian disaster whilst cultivating inter-ethnic conflict between pro-Albanian separatists and ethnic Serbs backed by Belgrade. This conflict now threatens to once again destabilise the entire region.

Officially, Kosovo is part of Serbia and Montenegro, but the region is administered by the United Nations Interim Administration Mission in Kosovo (UNMIK) and patrolled by Kosovo Force (K-FOR) troops “pending a final settlement” of its status.

This “final status” is framed as an attempt to appease the pro-imperialist ethnic Albanian forces that supported the United States and European powers in their efforts to dismantle the old Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, and the pro-western regime that was subsequently installed in Belgrade. According to Security Council Resolution 1244 the settlement involves “substantive autonomy,” but also a commitment to “the sovereign and territorial integrity of the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia [now renamed Serbia and Montenegro].”

UNMIK oversees the Provisional Institutions of Self-Government—including the president, the assembly, and the government of

Kosovo—elected with limited powers in 2001. New elections are scheduled for October 23 of this year and have become the focus of intense conflict between ethnic Albanian forces pressing for full independence and Serbian nationalists seeking to maintain a variant on Kosovo’s existing status—of which the latest round of ethnic cleansing against Serbs is only the bloodiest manifestation.

The Democratic Party of Kosova, a successor organisation to the pro-US stooge Kosova Liberation Army (KLA), runs Kosovo, under Prime Minister Bajram Rexhepi. Its Assembly—which, like the forthcoming elections, is boycotted by the Serbs—voted on July 8 to adopt several constitutional changes including the right to hold a referendum on independence. The Albanian government supports these moves, with its president Alfred Moisiu recently declaring his country’s interest in resolving Kosovo’s final status.

Albanian nationalists are also intent on pushing for the integration of ethnic Albanian areas in the area of south Serbia, known as the Presevo Valley—where 60,000 Albanians outnumber around 30,000 Serbs. The region was the scene of armed conflict in 2000 involving the Liberation Army of Presevo, Bujanovac and Medvedja (UCPBM)—a KLA offshoot. Saip Kamberi, a leader of the Party for Democratic Action, said, “It is only natural that Albanians today say this region should be united with Kosovo,” and Jonuz Musliu, leader of the Movement for Democratic Progress, successor to the disbanded UCPBM, said, “We want to unite with Kosovo, and we shall never give up.”

In 2001, this conflict was exported over the border into Macedonia by KLA-UCPMB forces, where ethnic Albanians constitute one quarter to one third of the population and separatist groups are also seeking incorporation into Kosovo.

In the aftermath of the March riots, Serbian Prime Minister Vojislav Kostunica put forward counter-proposals to Kosovan autonomy that were adopted unanimously by the Serbian parliament. The proposals involve the “cantonisation” of Kosovo by creating five ethnically separate Serb “sub-regions” in the north, comprising 30 percent of Kosovo’s territory. Each canton would have control over elections, security, education, and health, and also have their own assemblies and courts.

He described his proposals as “the only solution that is in accordance with resolution 1244, and does not lead towards the changing of borders, be it secession or division of Kosovo, and leads to stability in the region”.

Kosovo President Ibrahim Rugova said Kostunica’s proposals were unacceptable, as Serbs make up less than 10 percent of the province’s 2 million population, and repeated his call for complete independence.

There are conflicting positions amongst and between the representatives of the imperialist powers on how to politically stabilise this worsening situation, with some favouring seizing the nettle of greater autonomy for Kosovo and others considering Kostunica’s option. But there is a general feeling that presently things are out of control.

Following the riots, the head of UNMIK, the former Finnish Prime Minister Harri Holkeri, resigned to be replaced by Danish lawyer-

journalist Søren Jessen Petersen. Holkeri was closely associated with UNMIK's "Standards Before Status" policy, which states that discussions on the future status of Kosovo planned for the end of 2005 will only happen if certain benchmarks are met including a free market with private property rights, functioning democratic institutions and free movement of people.

The UN envoy to the Balkans, Norwegian Kai Eide, recently called for policy reversal in Kosovo and the start of talks on the final status of Kosovo, saying, "Standards Before Status" is "untenable in its present form."

"In the current situation in Kosovo, we can no longer avoid the bigger picture and defer the most difficult issues to an indefinite future," Eide added. "Marginal adjustments will only add to frustration, increase the danger of more violence, damage the reputation of Kosovo further, and weaken the international community."

Whatever happens in the months ahead, what is certain is that increased repressive force will be employed by the western powers. An additional 2,000 troops from France, Germany and Italy are to be sent to Kosovo next month, raising NATO strength to 20,000 troops or about one soldier for every 100 people in the territory. They will remain until after the October 23 elections. Additionally, several NATO countries including Germany, Italy and Belgium have removed so-called "national caveats" on direct policing actions—because "restrictive" rules of engagement imposed on them were blamed for two thirds of troops being unable to respond effectively to the violence in March.

French General Yves de Kermabon has taken over as commander of K-FOR from General Holger Kammerhoff, whose German K-FOR troops in Prizren ignored calls by German police in the town and let all Serb houses and Orthodox monasteries burn to the ground.

The situation in Kosovo is a bitter indictment of the western powers' so-called programme of "nation-building" in "failed states." Rather, poverty, corruption and ethnic separation have become endemic in the Balkan region as a result of the western powers' attempt to dismantle the former Yugoslavia.

The UN report leaked to the *Scotsman*, September 2, paints a devastating picture of the situation on the ground in Kosovo. It states, "UNMIK is in a funk.... After five years on the ground, progress towards UNMIK's objectives remains elusive and the mission seems to be nearing the point of overstaying its welcome. There are obstacles on all fronts, and the outlook for the medium term is worse."

UNMIK is described as being seen as "aloof," viewed as "strangers in the society they govern" and appearing "to have developed a habit of closing its eyes to the facts on the ground...the leadership was not interested in what goes on in the province."

The then-18,000-strong K-FOR force is described as being unable to maintain safety and security in Kosovo for minorities, for foreign diplomats and for UNMIK itself. Many of those interviewed for the report "believe that UNMIK and K-FOR would have collapsed had the riots gone on for another day or two.... Both UNMIK and K-FOR were overwhelmed by the events. K-FOR currently has neither the strength nor the posture required to maintain a 'safe and secure environment' within a civilian population."

An investigation by the United Nations High Commission for Refugees on the situation of Kosovo's minorities between January 2003 and April 2004 shows there were at least 145 separate incidents during that period in addition to those linked to the riots in March. Separate reports by Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch have accused UNMIK of a "catastrophic" inability to defend minorities.

Misha Glenny, author of *The Balkans: Nationalism, War and the Great Powers 1804-1999*, has also attacked UNMIK, saying that its failure to "restore some vitality to Kosovo's economic life and offer a positive perspective for a future political settlement acceptable to both sides" has

led to a situation where "both communities have provided thousands of young recruits to an army of the dispossessed and unemployed. With no money and the prospect only of further misery, frustration and anger have now reached a breaking point."

A recent World Bank report (*World Bank Report 29023-KOS, Kosovo Economic Memorandum 17 May 2004*) states that during the 1990s, economic output declined by 50 percent and by a further 20 percent after the NATO bombing in 1999. Since 1999, growth in the economy has been driven exclusively by \$2.2 billion in foreign aid and about \$0.5 billion in remittances from expatriate Kosovars. It warns that growth has been "driven by a post-conflict boom financed by official aid flows and is unlikely to be sustainable" because foreign governments and institutions have already reduced aid by 70 percent and will stop it completely by the end of the decade.

The World Bank report says that Kosovo's trade balance is severely one-sided, with imports worth about \$1 billion but exports valued at only \$40 million. The economy is "highly reliant" on taxes on these imports. There has only been \$30 million of foreign direct investment in the region since 1999, mainly in the banking sector.

Agricultural production has just about reached pre-conflict levels, but the large collective farms (*agrokombinats*) that dominated the agricultural sector and produced most of the fertilisers and pesticides have collapsed.

One of the economy's greatest problems is electricity. Because the power stations were bombed and maintenance has been abandoned, there were 90 days of power cuts in 2002; and on the other days, power was only available for six hours.

The World Bank points out that workers' wages—at \$220 a month—remain the lowest in Europe. They have not risen, although Kosovo has had low taxes and a labour market since 1999 that has "functioned in a virtually unregulated way with few formal arrangements regulating employment relationships and wage determinations." It warns that because foreign aid has dropped—reducing economic growth—"it will be a challenge to maintain current incomes over the next few years."

The only answer to this deteriorating situation offered by the imperialist powers and institutions is greater repression and policies that will only exacerbate both inter-ethnic violence and social hardship.

With "pervasive" unemployment standing at 50 percent, the World Bank recommends privatising and "downsizing" what remains of the industrial sector, with the 500 socially owned enterprises being reduced to a maximum of 100 and the rest liquidated.

Kosovo's lignite mines are "potentially one of the most economic in Europe" comprising 10 billion tons of good-quality, easily mined lignite the World Bank declares, but it recommends reducing the current number of 4,000 miners by half.

The Trepça lead and zinc mines employed 17,000 miners in 1991 when they showed "strong economic activity" and exported much of their minerals. The mines were shut down by K-FOR in 2000, which cited widespread metal pollution as the reason. The World Bank recommends they be reopened, but that the 10,000 miners still on their books be reduced to just 2,000.



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