

Seven years after US-led war on Yugoslavia

Deadlocks continue at Kosovo final status talks

Part One

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This is the first of a two-part article on Kosovo. The conclusion will be published on April 1.

Seven years after US-led NATO forces commenced Operation Allied Force—a 78-day military assault on Serbia in 1999—UN-initiated talks aimed at resolving the final status of Kosovo remain deadlocked. The issues at stake in the talks demonstrate that, contrary to the claims of the Clinton administration at the time, the war was never about protecting the “human rights” of the majority Albanian population from ethnic cleansing in the then Serbian province.

The diplomatic conflicts being fought out over Kosovo, between the local ethnic leaders—and behind them, the major foreign powers—are about the carving up of the province, like the rest of the former Yugoslavia, in the economic and strategic interests of the US and its European allies.

The bombing of Serbia in 1999, just as the war that was to follow against Iraq, was rooted in the drive of the US corporate elite to dominate world markets, control raw materials and exploit new sources of cheap labour. In Yugoslavia, this meant breaking up the federation into ethno-nationalist states and crushing Serbia, which opposed the carve-up.

The initial round of the current talks, involving delegations from the Kosovan and Serbian governments on February 20-21, resolved nothing. As the second one-day round began on March 17 at Vienna’s Auersperg Palace, thousands of Serbs protested on the anniversary of anti-Serb pogroms in 2004, when mobs of ethnic Albanians were mobilised to attack them and their property.

The second round opened with denunciations by Serb officials of the inclusion in the Kosovo delegation of former Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA) commander Hashim Thaci, who was convicted of terrorism in 1997 and is under investigation in Belgrade for war crimes. These protests fell on deaf ears. “The dark past will be buried tomorrow with Milosevic in Serbia,” Thaci told reporters, provocatively referring to the burial the next day of former Yugoslav president Slobodan Milosevic, who died in his prison cell four years into his war crimes trial at The Hague.

The talks broke down after the Kosovo representatives rejected Serb proposals for the creation of local government entities for

Serb minority groups within Kosovo, with direct links to the Serbian government. Having ghettoised Serbs and subjected them to sporadic violence since the end of the war, when half the Serb population fled, the Kosovo delegation denounced the proposal as “ethnic partition”.

The two sides agreed to meet again on April 3, but Albert Rohan, the UN mediator chairing the session, said there were “profound differences” over the details of the proposals, as well as over whether Kosovo should become independent.

Since 1999, the province of two million people has been administered as a protectorate under the terms of UN Security Council Resolution 1244, which formally recognised Serbia’s sovereignty over Kosovo while simultaneously placing it under the occupation of some 40,000 foreign troops (K-FOR) governed by an unelected UN viceroy.

The US by-passed the UN Security Council to launch the military intervention in 1999, by using its preeminent position within NATO. The UN was only brought in after the event to provide a rubber stamp for this unprovoked invasion. Resolution 1244 then presented the occupation as a peace keeping effort in a war that was ostensibly waged for “humanitarian” reasons to prevent genocide against Kosovo Albanians.

Over the intervening seven years, the UN and NATO—whose presence was justified on the grounds of maintaining a multi-ethnic society in Kosovo—have presided over an unprecedented degree of ethnic cleansing in which the KLA is heavily implicated.

According to the Transnational Foundation for Peace and Future Research (TFF): “There has been virtually no return of the 200,000 Serbs and tens of thousands of other non-Albanians who felt threatened by the Albanian nationalists and terrorists in 1999-2000. Proportionately this is the largest ethnic cleansing in ex-Yugoslavia.” The TFF is a Swedish-based thinktank, which acted as former advisor to the Belgrade government and the Kosovo Albanian leadership of Ibrahim Rugova in an attempt to find a negotiated settlement.

Citing figures compiled by the United Nations Mission in Kosovo (UNMIK), a report was presented to the European Parliament on March 6 by Dusan Batakovic, a member of the

Serbian negotiating team on Kosovo. He explained that 60 percent of the Serb population had been expelled since Kosovo became a UN protectorate, and those who remained were restricted to enclaves behind K-FOR barricades.

“There are practically no Serbs living in big cities such as Pristina, Pizren, Urosevac or Pec. In Pristina, there were about 40,000 Serbs prior to 1999, while today there are less than a hundred of them living in a single building, under appalling conditions, constantly guarded by KFOR,” the report stated.

The report cited other UN figures showing that more than 125 churches and monasteries and other significant or cultural heritage buildings have been destroyed. Approximately 40,000 flats and houses are registered as illegally occupied.

Other non-Albanian minorities have fared worse. Between 60 and 70 percent of Roma people have been expelled, while only 7,000 of the 17,000 Gorani (Muslim Slav Serbian-speaking) minority remain, according to figures compiled by the UN and the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe.

The Western media has not contested these figures; it simply neglects to report them. To do so would undercut the main thrust of the propaganda campaign about the “butcher” Milosevic, which blames the Serbian side for all the ethnic conflicts in the Balkans. This “bad man” or “bad Serbia” version of history has been evidenced in the majority of articles that have appeared on the death of Milosevic.

It has also been necessary to maintain the myth of a “just war” in the Balkans as the imperialist nature of US-led interventions has become more obvious in the occupations of Afghanistan and Iraq, and as the US and its allies ratchet up their claims and threats against Iran.

The UN Security Council authorised the current talks despite the violation of the pre-conditions it originally set down in December 2003. Referred to as the “Standards before Status” requirements, they set benchmarks for the return of refugees, freedom of movement and preservation of cultural heritage sites that had to be met before the issue of final status could be settled.

Following the riots aimed against Serbs in March 2004, however, “Standards before Status” was unceremoniously ditched. Kai Eide, the UN envoy who was dispatched to investigate the disturbances, reported: “Cases of inter-ethnic crimes and violence often go unreported, inhibiting ethnic minorities’ freedom of movement and encouraging impunity among Kosovo’s 90 percent Albanian majority.”

Eide’s conclusion was not to call for the standards to be enforced but to write them off as unworkable. UN secretary general Kofi Annan approved this decision and endorsed the status talks last October.

To describe the talks as “negotiations” is a misnomer. The degree of influence that the US and EU exert over the protectorate means that the de facto secession of Kosovo from Serbia has already occurred.

The chief UN envoy for the talks, ex-Finnish prime minister Martti Ahtisaari, is hardly an impartial figure. He played a central role in forcing Serbia to accept the terms of its withdrawal from the province in 1999 following the NATO bombings. He is chairman emeritus of the International Crisis Group (ICG), a

Brussels-based foreign policy organisation funded by big business and staffed by former ministers and high-ranking military officers. Among its members is Wesley Clark, NATO commander in chief of Operation Allied Force.

James Lyon, the ICG’s Belgrade representative, is on record as saying: “I think Kosovo is lost to Serbia. It’s been lost for some time. It’s been lost since 1999.” Alexander Anderson, head of the ICG office in Kosovo, said: “Within the last month, we’ve had US, UK and European Union envoys telling Belgrade that the likely, favored result of this process is going to be Kosovo’s independence and that it needs to concentrate on negotiating the best deal it can for Kosovo’s Serbs.”

While the UN Security Council must ratify any final settlement, the agenda is being set by the so-called Contact Group of the US, Britain, France, Germany, Italy and Russia, all of which have extensive economic, political and military interests in the Balkans.

In a January 31 statement, the group ruled out every option other than secession: “The Contact Group Guiding Principles of November 2005 make clear that there should be: no return of Kosovo to the pre-1999 situation, no partition of Kosovo, and no union of Kosovo with any or part of another country.” This month, British Foreign Secretary Jack Straw, reflecting the British alliance with the US, said Kosovo’s independence was “almost inevitable,” although his French counterpart, Philippe Douste-Blazy, stuck closer to the EU’s official line by saying that the negotiations “should not be prejudged”.

While secession is largely presented as a foregone conclusion, it has been made abundantly clear that withdrawal of KFOR troops is beyond consideration. Ahtisaari told Reuters: “It’s important that NATO retains its security role, no matter what the solution.” The numbers of troops has been reduced from 40,000 to approximately 17,000, but the US has established two permanent army bases in the southeast of the province, near the border with Macedonia.

Significantly, NATO conducted a show of strength to coincide with the second round of the status talks. Operation “Determined Effort 2006” involved 600 extra German troops. Its purpose was to demonstrate that the military presence, although lessened, could be bolstered at short notice if the talks were not concluded satisfactorily.

To be continued



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