

Kosovo “final status” talks break up without agreement

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Ongoing talks over the future of Kosovo have once again highlighted the predatory character of the NATO-led war on Serbia in 1999. Having transformed Kosovo into a “UN Protectorate” under the guise of protecting ethnic Albanians, the major powers are now seeking to formalise its “final status” as an “independent” state subservient to their interests and demands.

The UN-mediated meeting at Vienna’s Auersperg Palace on May 4 and 5 was meant to conclude the first round of “final status” talks, which opened in late February, but ended without resolution. Serbian and Kosovo Albanian representatives failed to reach any compromise over plans for decentralisation of power to Serb-run municipalities in the province. The UN is now preparing so-called shuttle diplomacy to push through the plan.

Serbian negotiators had tabled a proposal for the creation of numerous Serb-run municipalities, with the northern town of Mitrovica being divided into Serbian and Albanian zones. Mitrovica has been the centre of many flashpoints between Serbs and Albanians who live on opposite sides of the Ibar River. Albanian negotiators proposed the creation of only three new municipalities, with Mitrovica remaining one municipality with two sub-districts.

The ethnic carve-up of Kosovo, and the standoff over the allocation of local zones of power, both flow from the NATO intervention seven years ago. Political expediency dictated the decision by the UN and the “Contact Group” to make decentralisation the first item on the agenda of final status talks. The Contact Group consists of all the rival powers—the US, Britain, France, Germany, Italy and Russia—that have strategic and economic interests in the Balkans and the breakup of the former Yugoslavia since the early 1990s.

Before the talks even opened, they issued Serbia with an ultimatum to accept the separation of Kosovo as a *fait accompli*. In an attempt to deflect criticism, the UN and the Contact Group stated that this would only proceed once the Kosovo Albanian side had given assurances for the protection of the rights of Serb and other non-Albanian minorities in an independent Kosovo.

Even this ploy was an indictment of the UN scheme. Rights that are basic and universal were made conditional in exchange for the demands of the Kosovo Albanian separatists being met.

The cynicism underpinning this approach was articulated by the foreign policy thinktank, the International Crisis Group (ICG). Staffed by former presidents, prime ministers and military generals, its former chair, Martti Ahtisaari, was selected as the UN envoy directly responsible for overseeing the final status talks.

An ICG document, *Kosovo: The Challenge of Transition*, released before the talks opened, stated: “While agreement between Belgrade and Pristina remains desirable in theory it is extremely unlikely that

any Serbian government will voluntarily acquiesce to the kind of independence, conditional or limited though it may be, which is necessary for stable long term solutions. The international community, and in particular the UN Special Envoy charged with resolving the status process, Martti Ahtisaari, must accordingly prepare for the possibility of imposing an independence package for Kosovo, however diplomatically painful that may be in the short term ...”

In other words, once the Albanian side made gestures toward assuring the rights of minorities, the province could be forcefully dismembered from Serbia.

Any such assurances are meaningless, given the record of the United Nations Mission in Kosovo (UNMIK) and the NATO peacekeeping force (KFOR) over the past seven years. After riots in 2004, the UN ditched its “Standards before Status” pre-conditions for final status talks to commence. This was despite a damning report commissioned by UN Secretary General Kofi Annan, which concluded:

“Lack of security and respect for property rights as well as uncertainty about the future contribute heavily to the fact that those who commit crimes enjoy impunity and that the possibility for establishing viable livelihoods is very limited. The great majority of people who left Kosovo after June 1999 have not come back ...”

The report criticised “unrealistic expectations” and advocated returning refugees not to their homes, but areas where they were the dominant ethnic group. This was combined with a recommendation to devolve greater powers to the councils in charge of the enclaves. This has effectively led to a program of UN-sponsored ghettos, accelerating the process of segregation.

Another exposure of the UN’s fiction of a multi-ethnic Kosovo is the treatment reserved for non-Serb minorities. Roma, Gorani, Turks and other minorities, who have been denied representation at the final status talks. The Council of Europe and Turkish government had recommended direct involvement, but UNMIK deflected these calls. Minority concerns have been relegated to a Consultative Committee that has an advisory capacity only.

Albanian nationalists have driven the Roma out of the province in even greater numbers proportionately than the Serbs. Those remaining are living in UN-built refugee camps in the most degrading and hazardous circumstances.

Paul Polansky, an advocate of rights for Roma, has exposed the fact that the UN built the camps on toxic wasteland. In his book *UN-led Blood* he states: “At three camps built by the UN High Commission for Refugees, some 60 Gypsy children under the age of six have been exposed to such high levels of lead that they are highly likely to die soon or to suffer irreversible brain damage. This number represents every child born in the camps since they were built five and

a half years ago.”

Dr Rohko Kim, a Harvard professor and world expert on lead poisoning, has backed these claims. He visited the camps in February 2005 on a special mission and recommended they be evacuated. Despite the mounting evidence, the UN Secretary General Special Representative, Soren Jesson Petersen, has refused to take corrective action.

Probably the clearest example of the UN’s mendacity is provided by its welcoming of former Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA) commander-in-chief, Agim Ceku as the newly-installed Prime Minister of Kosovo.

Ceku, who has been implicated in war crimes carried out against Serbs in Croatia and Kosovo, has attempted to strike a statesman-like pose but his promises over the protection of minorities are threadbare. In an interview he said the Serb minority should “see Pristina, and not Belgrade, as their capital”. Pristina was home to 40,000 Serbs until 1999 when the vast majority were driven out by the KLA. Only around 100 remain today.

Having received assurances from UN and Contact Group representatives that independence is a done deal, Ceku is already acting like the leader of a sovereign state. He has stated that the UN-created Kosovo Protection Corps, based on former KLA fighters, is ready to become a fully operational army capable of participating in joint NATO exercises.

Without standing for election this military strongman has been inserted to head a civilian government. That this takes place with the approval of the UN and the major powers is warning that any post-independence Kosovan state will be enforced by authoritarian methods.

After seven years as a UN protectorate, social misery, corruption, lawlessness and ethnic division dominate everyday life in Kosovo. This is so for ordinary working class people of Serbian and Albanian descent alike—even as they are being cordoned off from each other.

The province’s population of over 2 million is sinking further into poverty. A World Bank study last year, entitled “Kosovo Economic Memorandum,” estimated that those living in extreme poverty had increased from 12 percent to 15 percent of the population. Children account for 34.5 percent of those living in extreme poverty. Extreme poverty is measured at living on 0.93 euros (\$US1.20) per day. Another 37 percent of the population lives in poverty (1.42 euro per day). The study was based upon figures for 2002.

While there are social disparities between Kosovo Albanians and Serbs, the World Bank report revealed that impoverishment affects them almost equally. Extreme poverty among Kosovo Albanians is 14.6 percent, compared to 13.9 percent for Serbs. Among other minorities, the rate is twice as high.

The World Bank cited examples of social squalor. Only 28 percent of the population is connected to a sewerage system. There is no wastewater treatment in Kosovo. Only 54 percent of households are connected to a central water system—31 percent rely on water from wells. TB rates are five times the level of western Europe. The unemployment rate is 60-68 percent.

The report attributed the rise in extreme poverty to decreasing international aid between 2000 and 2003. These conditions will only worsen as international aid continues to fall with the winding up of UNMIK operations and the global financial institutions insist on cuts to spending and public sector jobs. The government has committed itself to restricting public spending for the next three years.

According to the ICG: “UNMIK created a too-large civil service of 68,000, to which the PISG (Kosovo government) has added 7,000

since it gained responsibility for the budget in 2004. With a similar population, Slovenia has 20,000 civil servants but in Kosovo public service is in part a social security scheme. While average monthly salaries of 200 euros are far below what the utilities pay, they are well above the 120 euros the IMF considers the market rate and act as a drag upon the growth of private sector employment.”

The ruling Democratic League of Kosovo (LDK), its coalition partner the Alliance for the Future Kosovo (AAK), and the opposition Democratic Party of Kosovo (PDK)—the latter two are political offshoots of the KLA—have vied with one another to position themselves as middlemen in auctioning off the province’s resources to transnational companies.

Kosovo is in the midst of another wave of privatisation. Despite large deposits of coal, lead, zinc, gold, silver and petroleum, it remains the most backward and poorest province to emerge from the old Yugoslavia.

All of the parties are implicated in corruption and the black market, which have flourished since the civil war. The mafia networks that smuggled arms to the KLA during 1997 and 1998 are being used as a conduit for trade in contraband goods, narcotics and prostitution. Kosovo has become a key route for Albanian mafia trafficking in women and children from impoverished countries in southeast and eastern Europe.

Writing in the *Washington Times*, former US admiral and senior military representative James Lyons Jr commented: “None of this should come as a surprise. Even in 1999, when the Clinton administration decided to take military action in support of the so-called Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA), there were numerous and credible intelligence and news reports of the KLA’s criminal and illicit trades. When ostensibly demobilised, they were recruited by the UN into Kosovo’s police, civil administration, and quasi-military ‘Kosovo Protection Corps.’”

There could not be any clearer refutation of the humanitarian motives that were espoused to justify the NATO military intervention in 1999. The talks over final status are the diplomatic epilogue of a war of aggression waged for geo-strategic interests, in which the interests of Kosovo’s people have been the last concern. Rather, as social conditions have deteriorated, they have been increasingly subjected to a brutal mafia-style regime and pitted against each other along communal lines.



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