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April 21, 2008

Bridging the great divide

By Scott Taylor, Toronto Sun

<http://www.torontosun.com/News/World/2008/04/12/5265631-sun.html>

All seems quiet at the north end of the bridge. A pair of NATO patrol vehicles, a handful of French soldiers, a couple of UN policemen and several rolls of barbed wire block access to the roadway.

I take some photographs and start walking back into the Serbian sector of the city.

It is only then that I spot a group of young Serbs lingering in the shade of a kiosk.

These young men are known as the "bridgewatchers," and since the Kosovo conflict began in June 1999, they have maintained a 24-hour vigil on the Serbian side of this contested span across the Ibar River.

In the summer of 1999, as NATO forces deployed into Kosovo and Serbian security forces withdrew, nearly 800,000 Albanian Kosovars came flooding back into the province after they were displaced during the 78-day NATO bombing campaign.

This in turn generated an exodus from Kosovo of approximately 200,000 Serb and non-Albanian minorities who fled in fear of Albanian reprisals.

It was here in Mitrovica that the flood of Serb refugees halted at the Ibar River and defiantly laid claim to the northern portion of Kosovo, which is an entirely ethnic Serbian enclave connected to the Republic of Serbia.

Numerous violent encounters have taken place across the Mitrovica bridge between Albanians, Serbs and NATO troops. Located next to the Republic of Serbia, this entirely ethnic Serbian enclave has come to symbolize the failure of the international community to overcome the divide of ethnic hatred in Kosovo.

Following the Albanians' unilateral declaration of independence on Feb. 17, the Serbs of the Mitrovica pocket and other protected enclaves have refused to accept the authority of the newly proclaimed state of "Kosava."

To demonstrate their resolve, the Serbs took control of the Mitrovica courthouse and installed their own officials. It was this occupation of regional offices by the Serbs that led to a bloody confrontation with NATO troops on March 17.

When UN police and NATO vehicles rolled in to arrest the violators, the bridgewatchers sounded an air raid siren to summon other Serbs to the scene. The



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angry crowds clashed with the international security forces and vehicles were set ablaze, shots were fired.

One Ukrainian soldier died, 63 NATO soldiers were injured, and an undetermined number of Serbs were seriously wounded.

In a scathing internal memo to his superiors, UN regional representative Jerry Gallucci described the debacle as an "ill-conceived operation (that) has led to the disappearance of law and order in the north (of Kosovo)."

Gallucci was particularly incensed that the international community chose March 17 to launch their operation, as this date coincided with the anniversary of the 2004 pogrom in which three dozen people were killed and Albanians torched more than 800 Serbian homes.

In Gallucci's opinion, this timing coupled with the heavy-handed tactic of arresting and transporting the courthouse squatters "seemed almost designed to inflame Serbian sentiments."

In the leadup to, and in the immediate aftermath of Kosovo's declared independence, a large number of UN field officers voiced their concerns about the international community turning a blind eye to the reality of the situation on the ground.

Last year, a number of UN observers took the unprecedented step of compiling an independent analysis, which they published and circulated without filtering it through the chain of command.

The stated intention of the anonymous authors was to illustrate "the divide that exists between (their) first-hand knowledge ... and the rosy picture of the overall situation that is officially presented by top UN officials."

The facts presented in the report show that over the past nine years, the UN has failed to achieve its stated objectives in virtually every category.

To illustrate the international community's failure to provide a secure environment for non-Albanians in Kosovo, they point to the fact that there have been more than 1,000 abductions of Serbs and other minorities since 1999.

Of that number, only 253 bodies have been discovered, and yet not a single person has been found guilty for these crimes.

Under the terms of UN Resolution 1244, which facilitated the entry of NATO into Kosovo, the international community was to take full responsibility for the protection of Serbian heritage religious sites.



KOSOVO

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Despite the presence of more than 20,000 security personnel over the past nine years, Albanian extremists have managed to destroy more than 150 Serbian churches and monasteries -- many dating back to the 11th century.

One of the most alarming assessments in the UN field officers' report is that the criminal leadership of the Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA) guerrilla force, which was supposed to be disbanded, has instead assumed positions of power at all levels of Kosovo society. According to their summary, the KLA has simply "transformed into criminal structures, carrying out organized crime activities of drugs and weapons trafficking and prostitution."

As one field officer stated, those guerrillas "are the real power in Kosovo and many of their leaders are now politicians at all levels -- including Prime Minister (Hashim Thaci)."

The Kosovo police service is described as "poorly competent" and that, in turn, has resulted in a "culture that promotes intolerance with little or no moral obligation to non-Albanians."

The assessment of life in Kosovo for ethnic minorities is one of limited freedom of movement and constant fear. Also cited in the report is the fact that the international community has failed to protect non-Albanian language rights and that they have allowed the flag of the Republic of Albania to fly on most public institutions since 1999.

In their report's conclusion, the UN officers point out that the Pristina sports stadium is emblazoned with "an enormous picture of an armed, bearded, combat-uniformed KLA leader."

Such an image, they argue, runs counter to the UN's original mission of making Kosovo a secure environment for all residents.

Failure to remove the provocative poster demonstrates that the international community is in fact "bowing to the dictates of extremists and warlords."

Although this blunt assessment of the Kosovo situation was presented as a briefing note to the fact-finding delegation of the UN security council, the recommendation that the granting of independence would be an "irresponsible act" has now been superseded by the Albanians' Feb. 17 unilateral declaration.

Senior officials working with the UN in Kosovo confirmed that the analysis of this report was accurate, and they are frustrated and disappointed with the sudden elimination of their mandate.



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"The original role for the (NATO-led Kosovo troops, or KFOR) was to enforce UN Resolution 1244 -- which clearly recognized the Serbian sovereignty over Kosovo," explained Edward Tawii, a Canadian adviser to the UN interim administration police, who has spent the past eight years based there.

"Now they say that KFOR will be responsible to provide a secure environment in support of the independence declaration."

While the UN mission continues to function in this interim period, the administrative oversight in Kosovo is slowly being assumed by the European Union.

The EU will monitor and assist the newly proclaimed independent Kosovar government and oversee the operation of the Kosovo police service.

KFOR troops will remain in place for the foreseeable future, and NATO will continue to train and equip the Kosovo defence forces.

Since Serbia refuses to recognize Kosovo's independence, the government continues to administer services such as the issuing of pension cheques to those residing in non-Albanian enclaves.

Despite the presence of so many foreign troops and police officers -- 20,000 in a region of only two million inhabitants -- this overlapping of responsibility has generated a lot of confusion.

In many cases, the various and diverse national interests of the contributing NATO and non-NATO security forces have been exploited by the criminal elements of the Albanian population.

In the village of Orcusa, in the southern Kosovo mountainous region known as Gora, Norbert, a German master warrant officer, pointed out that the border to Albania here is wide open.

"Between us and the Albanian towns across the valley there is not even a checkpoint, let alone any barriers." According to the German officer, NATO soldiers in this sector refer to the Kosovo border police as the traffic police, since their purpose seems to be in assisting the flow of contraband, rather than impeding it.

In addition to the drugs and weapons smuggled across this border, there are vast tracts of deforested hillside where the Albanians crossed into Kosovo to cut down trees.

According to the German, this uncontested exploitation of Kosovo's resources and the open conduit for illegal trade could easily be curtailed.



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"We have reconnaissance vehicles with incredible surveillance capability," he said. "Our cameras would be able to pick up the colour of the woodcutter's eyes -- right across the valley. And one platoon of troops would suffice to close the border."

Asked why, over the past nine years, this has never been done, Norbert shrugged and said, "because somebody higher than my rank level wants it to remain open."

While international observers on the ground may be highly critical of the way events are unfolding in Kosovo and remain hard-pressed to explain the often contradictory policies and mandates they are asked to enforce, the one thing that is quite clear is that another confrontation is imminent and unavoidable.

A second showdown with the Serbs in Mitrovica is likely to erupt when NATO attempts to make good on their public promise to arrest the Serbian ringleaders of the March 17 incident.

Such a policy would ignore the recommendations of UN regional representative Jerry Gallucci. In his report, Gallucci urged his colleagues to offer the Serbs some "contrition or recognition of the mistake (the international community) made."

Instead, it seems that NATO wants to force submission on the Mitrovica Serbs as quickly as possible.

One reason for this is that the Serbian parliament has been suspended and an election is scheduled for May 11.

The primary battle cry in that campaign for both the Serbian Democratic Party and the nationalist Radical Party is "Kosovo is Serbia."

A solution imposed on Mitrovica while the Serbian leadership is in limbo would encounter far less opposition than after the next government is formed -- especially if they're elected with a pro-Kosovo mandate.

The clock is also ticking towards the next general assembly meeting at the UN in September.

So far, 34 countries, including Canada, have recognized Kosovo's independence. However, it is Serbia's intention to gain a consensus at the UN assembly that will declare Kosovo's unilateral independence illegal.

"We will be seeking a solution which will accommodate everyone and still uphold the UN Charter," said Serbian ambassador to Canada Dusan Batakovic from Belgrade.

Following Canada's recognition of Kosovo, Batakovic was recalled to the Serbian capital.



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"While we are firm on Serbian sovereignty over Kosovo, we are willing to discuss a power-sharing arrangement," he said, "and we want a renewal of multilateral discussions under UN auspices."

As for Canada's position on Kosovo, Batakovic was disappointed there was no parliamentary debate before Prime Minister Stephen Harper announced the decision.

"What exactly is independent about Kosovo? The UN resolution covering its status remains valid, there are thousands of international troops deployed to provide security, and significant numbers of non-Albanian Kosovo minorities are defying this decision."

As the international community engages in a war of words and diplomatic manoeuvring, the bridgewatchers in Mitrovica continue to monitor NATO activity on the far river bank.

According to a senior NATO intelligence officer, the next confrontation is expected to occur within a matter of "days or weeks -- not months."