

News/opinion feature

Solutions to Bosnian War are military

An analysis of the United Nations' role in the Bosnian War

by Tony Fabijancic

Under the auspices of a resolution authorizing military force to disburse aid to Bosnia-Herzegovina, the latest of numerous peace summits, and most recently the expulsion of Yugoslavia from the General Assembly, the U.N. has attempted a response to the war in Bosnia-Herzegovina. Since Croatia's declaration of independence more than a year ago, the Yugoslav (i.e. Serb) military has captured a quarter of Croatia's territory and two thirds of Bosnia-Herzegovina's, enacted the genocidal policies it accused the Croat government of planning for the Serb minority in that former republic, caused the largest movement of refugees in Europe since the Second World War, and systematically destroyed the cultural heritage of both Croats and Muslims. In effect, the lack of political will on the part of the international community to stop Serb aggression condones a year of savagery unparalleled in Europe since Ante Pavelic's fascist Croat regime (the Ustasha) terrorized Serbs during the Second World War.

There are arguments in favour of this inaction. Atrocities in this war, some say, are neither entirely one-sided, nor easy to untangle. It is probable, they point out, that Croat irregulars fighting in Bosnia are armed by a nationalist Franjo Tudjman presidency intent on appropriating as much territory as possible. Rumors of an under the table agreement between Tudjman and his Serb counterpart, Slobodan Milosevic, to drive out Bosnia's Muslims and split the newly declared country between them, have circulated for months. And while eye-witness reports and assessments by independent organizations like Helsinki Watch have verified the genocidal policies of Serbs, it is clear that the other parties in this war are hardly innocent. Ultra right-wing militias modelling themselves on the Ustasha have been operating on their own since fighting began a year ago, without the official support of the Tudjman government. The new Ustasha not only fight the Serb enemy, but also the Muslims, with whom they are supposedly allied. But oddities abound in this war, not least of which is the presence in Ustasha camps of Muslim "armija" posts, doctors with identi-

fication cards marked "HV", identifying them as Croatia, and the assassination of members of the Ustasha by the official Croatian Bosnian army.

The fact that Bosnia has become the Lebanon of the Balkans, a lawless embroilment of militias trying to flush out the Serbs (and sometimes each other), is undeniable and has made it that much more difficult for the international community to assess the conflict and determine a suitable plan of action. For almost a year it refused to embark on a mission of mercy (first in Croatia, now in Bosnia) not because, apparently, the Balkans are without strategic interest (something no federal leader will acknowledge publicly) but because no clear distinction between aggressors and victims seemed possible in what was considered a civil war, an "internal matter", to be sorted out by the warring factions themselves, not by an international police force liable to flounder in a Viet Nam-type quagmire. If all parties were equally responsible for creating this hellish maelstrom, how could the world take sides to end the fighting, particularly when the warring factions seemed unwilling to do it themselves? Moreover, U.N. peace keeping forces have always operated on the basis of neutrality. To change this principle would mean to fundamentally change the parameters of U.N. peace keeping. It would mean empowering peacekeepers and transforming them into potential peacemakers instead. The cost of establishing such a precedence, particularly for an oil-free country somewhere on the fringes of Europe is undoubtedly high, financially and otherwise. There are half a dozen other flash points world wide that could soon require U.N. intervention - and for months, perhaps years to come. Furthermore, any commitment on the part of nations with their own internal disputes (Britain and Spain particularly, where the Irish and Basque questions remain open) is too clear a signal for future international meddling.

But it has become clear, if it was not always, that this war is not one between equals or one of equal responsibility. Despite signs of paranoia, hate, and aggression on all sides, the Serbs have generated the greater part of the violence and whipped things up to their present

level of intensity. To perceive the war in terms of ethnicity - in other words, to see it as an ethnic conflict whose sides have similarly valid (or invalid) claims - and therefore to summarily dismiss it as typical of ethnic warfare in which hatred is acted out in equal measures, is to misread it. Yet, this characterizes the U.N. response to the conflict. Despite all its diplomatic initiatives against Serbia (which have had no real effect on the fighting itself) the U.N. has sought real solutions based on the principle of neutrality - and neutrality means an obfuscation of the relentless and premeditated expansionism of the Serbs.

This is not to deny the tone the war has taken all over Bosnia, but to distinguish between aggression and aggressive reaction, between carefully calculated plans to carve out new territory and attempts to curb those plans. The essential nature of this war has either been misunderstood or, ominously, ignored at the crucial level of international involvement, namely on the ground during the operations of U.N. peace keepers. What limited functions they have been granted (the opening of the Sarajevo airport, the distribution of aid) for people who are shelled daily, massacred while they stand in bread lines, and terrorized every evening as they try to sleep is like saving the wounded long enough so they can witness their own execution. Sanctions, cease-fires, condemnations, and commiserations are poor answers to problems that require immediate action on the ground, in the devastated areas themselves. In other words, some indisputable sign must be given to the Serbs, beyond mere rhetoric and decorative outrage, that barbarism is an unacceptable vehicle of change this late in the 20th century. One relatively safe, constructive first step would take the form of air strikes on links between Serbia and Bosnia, roads, bridges, rail lines, thereby preventing troop movements into the attacked areas and cutting off Bosnian-Serb fuel supplies (Serbia produces about one fifth of its own oil, the only source now that sanctions have taken effect).

Warnings before the first rumblings of war that the Serbs envisioned a greater Serbia were discounted as the ravings of Croat nationalists who were equally likely to suppress their own minorities as the Serbs suppressed theirs. These warnings have proven prophetic. There are others. The Albanians in Kosovo will not suffer Serb martial law forever, nor will the Serbs tolerate the slightest provocation. Such a conflict could ultimately dwarf the present one because it would draw in Albania itself, thereby igniting a larger Balkan war that would awaken on all sides a mythologized history of violence deep with religious and cultural overtones, and ultimately trigger a larger conflict, if only ideological, between Muslim states and the west.

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the lengths they are still willing to go in expanding Serbia proper. Having lost the PR war has, if anything, sped up rather than slowed their operations because it has simply reinforced a very old paranoia: that the genocidal barbarians are hammering away at the gates of Serb civility and every possible measure must be taken to stop them. The seriousness of Ustasha threats in southern Croatia to take back territory lost in the Croat war a year ago may also prolong the fighting. In any case, the solutions to this war are military, and any assumptions about the value and success of peace negotiations are naive and damaging.

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