

HUMAN RIGHTS SITUATION IN THE FORMER YUGOSLAVIA

ISSUE

The human rights situation throughout most of the territory of the former Yugoslavia remains a matter of grave concern for Canada. The continuing armed conflict in this region, fuelled by ethnic intolerance and long-standing rivalries, has resulted in the violation of almost every norm of international humanitarian law.

Until the fighting can be stopped and security and stability restored, human rights abuses will continue. In areas as yet untouched by war, the volatility of inter-ethnic feelings may result in the conflict spreading to other republics of the former Yugoslavia, and perhaps to other Balkan states.

BACKGROUND

The abuse of minority rights has been widespread from the beginning of the crisis in the former Yugoslavia. As the federal republic disintegrated, the Serbs sought to ensure their "nation" would remain within one country. In so doing, the Serbs tried to extend their control over regions in which other groups have lived for centuries as resident minorities, and where new states led by non-Serbs were seeking international recognition. Other groups such as the Croats and Muslims sought to consolidate their position in the new states by suppressing the minority rights of others, including Serbs.

The most blatant abuses of human rights in the former Yugoslavia have taken place through the practice of "ethnic cleansing", which involves the use of murder, rape, forced pregnancies, torture or other forms of intimidation to drive people of one ethnic group from their homes and villages in areas claimed by another ethnic group. This has had a devastating impact in a region where roots run deep and while there is virtually no social mobility.

The first widespread use of ethnic cleansing occurred in Croatia where both Serbs and Croats have been forced to move from areas where they were in the minority to other locations where they formed the majority. The United Nations has deployed several thousand peace-keepers in four UN Protected Areas (UNPAs) to try and establish some semblance of law and order, and to reassure the civilian population in those areas. A two-year-old ceasefire between the Croatian and Serb forces has held generally, although there have been some serious violations during the past year.

In Bosnia-Herzegovina, ethnic cleansing is still widespread and systematic. More than 100,000 people have been killed, several hundred thousands more injured, and close to three million have been displaced or forced to seek refuge in neighbouring countries. The UN High Commissioner for Refugees, along with the International Committee of the Red Cross and other humanitarian agencies, has been providing emergency relief supplies to many who have no other means of sustenance or shelter.

The United Nations Protection Force (UNPROFOR) has been deployed in Bosnia-