

*Government Orders*

I would also like to extend sincere greetings to my constituents in Laval Centre. On October 25 they proved that they understood the importance of respecting the individual by electing me as their representative.

I will now focus on the subject of my speech. For several hours, members of this House have applied the profound values of our North American society to an issue that is both painful and necessary: should we review the usefulness of the presence of Canadian peacekeepers in the world's hot spots, in light of past experience and of the new geopolitical context that has arisen as a result of recent disruptions, especially in Eastern Europe?

The answer, of course, is yes. From personal experience, we all learned long ago that situations and contexts constantly change and what yesterday seemed obvious is far less clear today. The Bosnian conflict is a case in point. We must not be afraid of analysing reality, even if we see some elements we did not even know existed. It is our duty as a responsible society.

The reality we are analysing today has two sides. I call them the reality of the heart and the reality of the mind. I do not know which takes precedence over the other, but I hope that the decisions we will be asked to make are made in light of values that are fundamental to Canadian and Quebec society, in other words, our democratic values, our collective responsibilities and respect for the individual.

Ever since the news brutally reminded us of the existence of the former Yugoslavia, there is a memory that often comes back to haunt me.

• (1725)

It was in the early sixties, at the end of January, and yes, I was on a ski slope. It was snowing. A friend introduced the man she was going to marry. He was a Yugoslav, but over the past few years, Stéphane has become a Croat, first and foremost. He predicted what is happening now in that part of the world when he said thirty years ago: "When Tito disappears, this artificial country will be a bloody battlefield." He was right, of course, and it did not take long for his apocalyptic vision to become a reality.

Slovenia was able to resist the Yugoslav army and managed to assert its independence at the end of 1991. Croatia, however, quickly became the scene of a civil war that significantly altered its borders. Without the presence of the UN peacekeepers, the conflict would have been far worse. During the past year, Bosnia-Herzegovina has monopolized the headlines in the international media. An area where Croatians, Serbs and Muslims had managed to live together in harmony, it has now become a genuine powder keg. Powerless, we watch a tragedy that can only compare with the vast displacement of the millions

of men, women and children who suffered as victims of the atrocities committed during the Second World War.

When my friend Stéphane listens to the news and reads the papers, he thinks about the victims of this conflict which seems to go on and on. Who are they? Women and children, of course. In Sarajevo, 10,000 people have died in 21 months. More than 1,500 were children. But the others, those who manage to survive, what kind of reality do they face from day to day? For them, life is synonymous with fear. Hunger, cold, sickness, violence and death are everywhere.

In Bosnia-Herzegovina, as in any territory where armed conflict lashes out indiscriminately, the average citizen is separated from his environment. The population of this area is estimated at more than four million, two-thirds of whom have fled their homes or what is left of them in their search for elusive safety. This exodus is the most staggering facet of the entire conflict in the former Yugoslavia. Intimidation, torture, murder and rape perpetrated on minorities under military occupation have all contributed to the "ethnic cleansing" of zones controlled by the warring parties.

Can we decently question the usefulness of UN contingents? If they were not there, would food, medicine, and blankets have any chance of reaching those protected areas that receive a stream of destitute refugees?

Mr. Speaker, the answer is no. In fact, inter-ethnic confrontations in the former Yugoslavia have caused the exodus of millions of people who are desperately seeking refuge. In Bosnia-Herzegovina, out of a total population of 4.5 million, the office of the High Commissioner for refugees calculates more than 2.7 million persons have been displaced.

• (1730)

This is roughly the population of Greater Montreal. These people are out on the roads, sometimes in bitter cold.

At the very beginning of this conflict, displaced families received help from relatives, friends, fellow countrymen. This is no longer the case. The situation has deteriorated considerably and it is hurting the majority of the people from the former Yugoslavia. The conflict is wreaking economic havoc throughout the area.

If any one still wondered about the importance of the UN military presence in critical areas, let us just think back to last fall, when the flow of relief was interrupted for nearly three weeks following attacks on UN convoys. Barely 40 per cent of the required supplies reached the civilians. I am convinced that no one in this House will dare call into question the relevance of the assistance provided to the civilian population by these men and women who, in the name of fundamental rights and freedoms and at the peril of their own lives, try to minimize for these people the disastrous and inhuman effects of insane conflicts.