

Tensions rise in Kosovo end game

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With UN-imposed independence for Kosovo likely by the end of the year, observers fear ethnic violence, but some also say violence is guaranteed if the status quo is allowed to continue.

By Anes Alic in Sarajevo for ISN Security Watch (27/09/06)

NATO has increased its presence in Serbia's UN-administered province of Kosovo in the face of renewed ethnic violence, as the international community prepares to finalize the province's status.

Last week, the six-member Contact Group overseeing Balkan diplomacy for the past decade authorized UN chief mediator Martti Ahtisaari to propose a solution for Kosovo's final status and achieve a settlement by the end of this year.

The Contact Group – the US, Britain, Russia, France, Italy and Germany – on 20 September authorized Ahtisaari to make the decision without the assent of either Serbia or Kosovo Albanians, and neither side would be allowed to block the decision's implementation.

The final solution is widely expected to lead to UN-imposed independence, under long-term EU and NATO supervision.

Western governments had rejected Russian and Serbian pleas to slow the process to allow for more time for talks between the two sides. Unexpectedly, at least for Belgrade, Russia, a longtime Serbian political ally, supported every detail of the Contact Group statement. Serbian authorities had expected Russia to use its veto power. Some observers believe that Russia failed to use its veto power in part because Kosovo's independence could advance arguments for independence for Georgia's Russian-backed breakaway republics and for Moldova's breakaway region of Transdneistria.

"Ministers reaffirmed their commitment that all possible efforts be made to achieve a negotiated settlement in the course of 2006," read the Contact Group statement.

The group called on Ahtisaari to draw up a status agreement proposal for consideration within four to six weeks.

In previous statements, Ahtisaari said that a negotiated solution remained everyone's hope, and that the status-quo was unstable and could not be allowed to continue indefinitely.

Ahtisaari has said that while there was no fixed deadline, he intended to move ahead with the process quickly.

Meanwhile, the Serbian government has called on Ahtisaari to step down, accusing him of siding with Kosovo Albanians on the sensitive issue.

“It would be more honest of Ahtisaari if he stepped down instead of seeing him openly, in front of the whole world, fall in line behind the Albanian separatists,” Serbian government spokesman Srdjan Djuric told a 22 September press conference in Belgrade, reiterating that Serbia would reject all solutions involving a modification of its borders.

Kosovo has been under UN administration since 1999, following a NATO bombing campaign that drove out Serb forces accused of ethnic cleansing.

Recent talks between Serbs, who want Kosovo to remain as part of Serbia, and majority Albanians, who will settle for nothing short of independence, failed to produce a breakthrough. Western countries tend to view Serbian authorities as obstructive.

When the talks began in February, the international community made it clear that if the two sides failed to reach a compromise, the UN Security Council could take the matter into its own hands. The Contact Group’s latest announcement came as no surprise, following on the heels of a recent statement by Ahtisaari’s deputy, Albert Rohan, who described the chances for further progress in the negotiations as “increasingly slim.”

Seven rounds of UN-sponsored talks in Vienna achieved little result, and after months of negotiations, the Serbian and Kosovo delegations would not budge from their original positions.

So far, negotiations have focused on minor issues such as the creation of more municipalities for the Serbian minority and the shift of power from the central government to municipal authorities.

Despite viewing the Serbian side as obstructive, the international community has criticized the Kosovo Albanian side for not doing enough to ensure more rights for the Serbian minority and to foster the creation of a truly multi-ethnic society.

The Serbian minority live in separate areas guarded by NATO peacekeepers. Serbian officials estimate that about 200,000 Serbs have left their homes over the past seven years and settled in Serbia proper.

Ethnic Albanian authorities praised the Contact Group’s decision to determine the province’s status by the end of this year, pledging commitment to achieving the standards of a democratic society, ensuring multi-ethnicity and protecting minorities.

But whatever the result, it is not expected to see a smooth implementation.

Serbian President Boris Tadic, a moderate politician, said that any imposed decision with regard to Kosovo would trigger an ethnic conflict with dire consequences. Tadic said that imposed separation could bring the ultra-nationalist parties to power in Serbian elections set for next year.

The Serbian president said that a UN-imposed solution for Kosovo would destabilize a few countries in the region and the result would likely be to delay their EU membership bids.

In New York, Ukrainian Foreign Minister Borys Tarasyuk told the UN General Assembly that granting independence to Kosovo could have a ripple effect from the Black Sea to the Caucasus.

Serbian Foreign Minister Vuk Draskovic told the Kosovo daily *Epoka e Re* that independence for the province could spark trouble not only in Kosovo but in neighboring Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro and Macedonia.

"[...]No border in the Balkans has been changed with an agreement. Borders have always been changed with wars, and imposing Kosovo's independence would naturally bring such trouble," Draskovic said on 25 September.

But Ahtisaari disagrees.

"Crises around the world have different causes, and specific solutions must be found to each one," he told a press conference following the Contact Group meeting on 20 September.

Still, others are looking to take advantage of Kosovo's seemingly pending independence.

Leaders of Bosnia's Serb-dominated Republika Srpska entity, in their campaign for Bosnian general elections scheduled for 1 October, suggest that if Kosovo were to be declared independent, it would legitimize their own right to secede from Bosnia. The international community has categorically rejected such an idea.

Back in Kosovo, the Serb-dominated northern part of the province has threatened to secede and split the province in two if Kosovo's is granted independence by the UN.

As such, the ethnic Albanian majority is under intense Western pressure to improve the rights and security of the remaining 100,000 Serbs, who live isolated and protected by international peacekeepers, to remove any justification for a secession bid.

James Lyon, the Serbia project director for the Brussels-based International Crisis Group (ICG) think tank, told ISN Security Watch earlier this year that independence was the only "workable" solution for Kosovo and that it was not likely to lead to regional instability.

"In spite of the desire by some inside Belgrade to push the idea that Kosovo independence would have a spill-over effect in other areas of the Balkans, we have been unable to identify such a potential. However, the Balkans have changed in the last five years, and the threats to regional security and stability are no longer the same. First and most noticeably, the 'domino effect' is no longer a genuine issue," he said.

Lyon said there was "no direct parallel between Kosovo and the Serb-inhabited areas of Bosnia," and that the "Republika Srpska was founded on genocide and ethnic cleansing." He also said Macedonia was much different than it was in 2001, when conflict broke out between Macedonian security forces and ethnic Albanians. "The country appears to have resolved its internal differences [...]," he said.

However, the Serbian authorities, still reeling over the loss of Montenegro, which voted for independence in a May referendum and shortly afterwards broke away from the state union

with Serbia, say they will not let Kosovo slip away.

The Serbian government, led by nationalist Prime Minister Vojislav Kostunica, plans to include a preamble in the country's new constitution that will describe Kosovo as an "integral part" of Serbia.

Serbian radical party leader Tomislav Nikolic has even urged the army to remain on full alert for a possible armed conflict, though the government and international community have rejected the call, made by Nikolic during a military parade over the weekend.

Though few believe another armed conflict would erupt in Kosovo, observers see a good chance of increased ethnic violence. Since 1999, incidents of ethnic violence have been reported weekly, if not daily, most of them involving ethnic Albanian attacks on Serbian minority enclaves.

In March 2004, some 19 people were killed and some 4,000 displaced in anti-Serb riots that damaged hundreds of homes and Orthodox churches and monasteries.

With that in mind, and with a status solution just around the corner, NATO's 16,000-strong peacekeeping force has increased patrols in the restive northern part of the province, where most of Kosovo's Serbs live, following a series of incidents in the past week.

Last week, there were four bombings, one of which wounded four Serbs in the western town of Gnjilane, where Albanians and Serbs live together.

Three other bombs were placed under parked vehicles, one of them under the car of Kosovo's Interior Minister Fatmir Rexhepi. No one was wounded in those incidents.

It was unclear if the bombings were related to ethnic tensions or involved score-settling between rival politicians or criminal networks.

Kosovo Prime Minister Agim Ceku said in an interview with The Associated Press that he blamed Serbian nationalists for using "primitive propaganda" to incite ethnic tensions to derail the UN's Kosovo solution.

Regardless, as a final Kosovo status solution nears, international authorities fear that tensions between the communities might increase. Violence is expected in any case. If independence is granted, there is fear that some kind of Serbian paramilitary force could intervene under the guise of protecting the Serb minority. On other hand, if independence is rejected and the status quo is allowed to continue, Kosovo Albanians could intensify attacks on Serbs.

International authorities there say they are determined to thwart any security threats, with NATO's new commander in Kosovo, German General Roland Kather, saying the peacekeeping force was fully prepared to overcome any obstacles to stability.

"Whoever thinks there will be no peaceful development of the situation during ongoing talks on solving the Kosovo status, I tell them we shall not tolerate violence from anybody's side," Kather said in a statement.

He said the security situation in Kosovo and along the border with Serbia was good.

During a visit to Kosovo over the weekend, commander of the European Union forces (EUFOR), General Reiner Scuwirth, instructed troops to be ready to confront any group trying to foment insecurity.

But most observers agree that violence is likely either way – whether by maintaining the status quo or declaring independence.

“The current status of Kosovo is so unworkable and unable to create a stable economic, social and political situation that a new status must be found. Of all the available options, independence is the most workable,” the ICG’s Lyon said.

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