

Comment

NATO GAVE US THIS ETHNIC CLEANSING

The Macedonian war is a fight about borders, not human rights

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The good guys of yesteryear have become the bad guys in Macedonia. Reports from the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe, US state department and UN last week all point to the Albanian separatists fighting here as perpetrators of ethnic cleansing directed at the Macedonian population.

This comes as no surprise to Balkan-watchers who have been following the evolving tragedy in the country. During the 10 years of fighting in what was once Yugoslavia, Macedonia managed to remain unscathed, without help from the international community. After tense negotiations, the Yugoslav army left peacefully, an admirable effort credited mainly to the first Macedonian president, Kiro Gligorov. There was tension - Gligorov himself survived an assassination attempt - but no fighting.

The government and the people were repeatedly applauded by the international community for their efforts in creating and maintaining a multi-ethnic society. Parties representing ethnic minorities sat in parliament. Albanian parties were coalition partners in all governments. Today six out of 17 government ministers are ethnic Albanians, the parliamentary vice-president is Albanian and so are several ambassadors. There are primary and secondary schools and colleges teaching in Albanian; an Albanian university is about to open. There are Albanian TV stations, theatres, newspapers. Why then the recent ethnic violence?

Albanian militants claim that they are fighting for human rights. This is a mantra which has proved to be a winning argument in the past. However, this time it is a front for an armed redrawing of the borders. The occupation of territory; abduction and murder of civilians; threats to bomb the parliament building in Skopje; cutting off water supplies to Prilep; and the ethnic cleansing perpetrated on the majority Macedonians (a minority in the area of the conflict) all raise the question: does one fight for language recognition with mortar fire and snipers?

The "ethnic cleansers", the NLA, are mainly old KLA soldiers who fought in Kosovo alongside Nato. Most of their arms and fighters come across the border from Nato-administered Kosovo. The UN security council last week requested that KFor and UNMIK (the UN's Interim Administration Mission in Kosovo) patrol the porous border more vigilantly.

American, EU and Nato diplomats have brokered a peace agreement, which centres on a better guarantee of the Albanians' minority rights, as a pre-requisite for disarmament. This misses the point: the radical Albanians are fighting for territory. They are doing precisely what many observers have been warning against for years - escalating the violence until the average citizen is radicalised.

Even though diplomats insist they will not negotiate with the NLA, the west is, de facto, legitimising killing in the name of a language dispute. Meanwhile, this fragile and impoverished country - the same country which was the primary base for Nato's operation against Milosevic's Yugoslavia, continues to perform that role for peacekeeping in Kosovo (much at its own peril) and which took 350,000 Kosovan refugees - is being ripped apart under the onslaught of gunmen armed and trained by Nato.

Macedonia is collateral damage of Nato's involvement in the Balkans. The US and its allies consider it too risky to try to disarm the KLA (or NLA), even though this was an explicit responsibility of their Kosovo mandate. Last year's disarmament of the KLA was largely symbolic. Body bags are not sexy, so Nato chose to let the militants keep their weapons.

Nato's Kosovo escapade did much more than arm and train the militants. It escalated the conflict. The psychological effect of the entire world siding with the Great Cause (as Albanian extremists see it) has given a boost to their armed secessionist struggle. Ethnic cleansing and occupying territories is an advanced step in redrawing borders. The last 10 years in Yugoslavia have taught us what this leads to. The international community cannot stop the bloodshed by hypocritical appeals to "both sides". Nato, EU and the US applied immense pressure on democratic Macedonia not to defend itself. Now, the aggression and insurrection have got out of hand. As a result of the "peace process," Macedonia is on its way to federalisation and disintegration.

The NLA must abandon its armed aggression and insurrection before there are more political talks. The US has a moral obligation to stop them from turning Macedonia into another Afghanistan or Cambodia. As we learned in Bosnia, leaving the ethnic-cleasers unchecked causes more trouble down the line.

Milcho Manchevski wrote and directed the award-winning film, *Before the Rain*. His next film, *Dust*, will open at the Venice film festival in September