

JUST A MORAL OBLIGATION

by Milcho Manchevski

Macedonia is collateral damage of the US policy in Kosovo. A report by the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (which monitors the events in Macedonia), a statement by the State Department, and a UN officer this week all pointed at the Albanian separatists fighting in this Balkan country as perpetrators of ethnic cleansing directed at the Macedonian (often incorrectly called Macedonian Slav) population. The good guys of yesteryear became bad guys.

This comes as no surprise to those diehard Balkan-watchers who have been following the evolving tragedy in Macedonia.

During the ten years of brutal fighting in what once was Yugoslavia, Macedonia managed to stay unscathed. This she did without help from the international community. After tense negotiations, the Yugoslav army left peacefully, an admirable task credited mainly to the first Macedonian president Kiro Gligorov. There was tension (Gligorov himself survived an assassination attempt which left him with one eye and with shrapnel lodged in his brain), but no fighting. The government and the people were repeatedly applauded by the international community for their efforts in creating and maintaining a multiethnic society. (The international community didn't help, though. The embargo on Yugoslavia crippled Macedonia's feeble economy; Greece waged its own embargo on the young state.) Parties representing ethnic minorities sat in the parliament. Albanian parties were coalition partners in all governments since independence, and at present six of seventeen government ministers are ethnic Albanians, the parliament vice-president is Albanian, as well as several ambassadors. There are primary, secondary schools and colleges in Albanian; an Albanian university is about to open. There are tv stations, theaters, newspapers in the languages of the minorities. Why then the recent ethnic violence?

The Albanian militants claim they are fighting for human rights. This is a mantra which has proven to be a winning argument in the past. However, this time the human rights issues are a front for armed redrawing of borders. The occupation of territory, abduction and murder of civilians, the threats to bomb the parliament building (in downtown Skopje, the capital), cutting off water supplies to the third largest city and - finally - the ethnic cleansing perpetrated on the majority Macedonians (who are a minority in the area of the conflict) point to the obvious: does one fight for language recognition with mortar fire and snipers? (Can someone kill cops in LA or Miami demanding that Spanish be spoken in the Senate?)

The "ethnic cleansers" - NLA - are mainly old KLA soldiers who fought in Kosovo alongside NATO. (Even their initials are the same in Albanian: UCK.) 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 patrol the porous border more vigilantly.

American, EU and NATO diplomats try to broker a peace agreement which centers on better guarantee for the Albanians' minority rights, as a pre-requisite for disarmament. This misses the point: the radical Albanians fight for territory.

They are doing precisely what many observers have been warning against for years - escalating the violence until the average citizen gets affected and radicalized.

Even though the diplomats insist they will not negotiate with NLA (whom NATO's secretary general George Robertson called "thugs and murderers"), the west is - de facto - legitimizing killing in the name of a language dispute. What a paradox!

Meanwhile, the fragile and impoverished country which was praised for its multiethnic society and government, the same country which was (and is) the primary base for NATO's operation against Milosevic's Yugoslavia and peace-keeping in Kosovo (much at its own peril), the country which took 350,000 refugees from Kosovo (an increase in population of whole 15%) is being ripped apart under the armed onslaught of gunmen armed and trained by NATO. Macedonia is collateral damage to NATO's involvement in the Balkans. The US and its allies consider it too risky to try to disarm KLA (or NLA), even though this was an explicit responsibility of their Kosovo mandate. Last year's disarmament of the KLA was largely a symbolic affair. Body bags are not sexy, so NATO chose to let the militants keep their western weapons. (Three weeks ago the US evacuated several busloads of militants from the surrounded village of Aracinovo - complete with their weapons. A rumor that seventeen American advisors were among the surrounded extremists triggered an angry reaction by the Macedonian crowds who tried to block the busses, and later stormed the parliament building.)

NATO's Kosovo escapade did much more than arm and train the militants who now execute a classical blowback. It escalated the conflict in the Balkans to a higher level. The psychological effect of the entire world putting itself on the side of the Great Cause (as seen by the Albanian extremists) has given a boost to their armed

secessionist struggle. Ethnic cleansing and occupying territories is an advanced step in redrawing borders. The last ten years in Yugoslavia taught us what this leads to.

The US has a chance to stop the bloodshed and further collapse of democratic values in Europe. This can not be achieved 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 got out of hand. As a result of the "peace process," Macedonia is on its way to federalization and disintegration.

Last month President Bush issued an order blocking the accounts of the leaders of NLA and barring them from entering the US; the European allies followed suit. This is obviously not enough.

If the US wants to demonstrate its stand against redrawing borders in the Balkans, if she wants to stick to her word (NATO promised to defend Macedonia, as General Wesley Clark points out in his book), if she doesn't want to set an example where she discards her allies when tough action (even on a minor scale) is demanded, then the US should choke the arms supplies and send the warmongers where Milosevic went. The NLA must be forced to abandon its armed aggression and insurrection BEFORE there is more political talk. The US must do this even if it requires limited military involvement, such as arresting the NLA leaders (and expanding Bush's "black list") and seizing its arms depots. The US has a moral obligation to stop them from turning Macedonia into another Afghanistan or Cambodia, two sad examples of blowback and collateral damage from American involvement. As we learned in Bosnia, leaving the ethnic-cleansers unchecked causes much more trouble down the line.

Or, as that proverbial lawyer in a Hollywood joke said: "Good news. It's only a MORAL obligation." Except this time it is a practical obligation as well.

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