

FOCUS

Kosovo: Airstrike May Not be the Solution

by Ekram Kabir

Currently, out of the 2 million in Kosovo, one in nine is a Serb and the rest are Albanian Muslims. Interestingly, forty per cent of the population in the southern neighbouring Macedonia are Albanians as well. The Albanian population in the region — Kosovars, the Albanians in Albania and the Albanians of Macedonia may group as one against the Serbs.

AS the clock for a NATO airstrike is "s-l-o-w-l-y" ticking, the Kosovo carnage is getting worse, and Yugoslav President Slobodan Milosevic has not stopped offensive on Albanians in Kosovo.

A massive humanitarian disaster looms. The western wire agencies say, several hundred thousand people have already lost their homes, and at least 50,000 are living without shelter in remote mountains, facing death by starvation and exposure to cold. Even those who still have roofs are in danger from a food-blockade imposed by Milosevic. This humanitarian disaster, can, say critics, easily be solved only by the "international community" by using political and military means.

But the USA and its allies know that a military strike would not be, somehow, a solution to the problem. Kosovo will remain an ethnically Albanian province of Serbian Yugoslavia. While the Kosovars want independence, the sole superpowers will politically only support a return to autonomy — something like "putting the toothpaste back in the tube."

This brings in the question of the Kosovo Liberation Army. Regarded as the world's fastest-growing guerrilla army, the KLA had convinced many observers, and many among the ethnic Albanian majority in Kosovo, that it posed a serious threat to Serbian rule. All the pieces seemed in place: funding from expatriate ethnic Albanians in Europe and America; weapons smuggled in from neighbouring Albania; and a cadre of officers trained by the Yugoslav army and experienced in Bosnia.

There clearly is a motive: Belgrade had ruled this southern Serbian province directly since 1989, compiling the worst human rights record in Europe along the way. Denied self-government, expelled from university and fired from their jobs,

arbitrarily beaten and detained on a regular basis, Kosovar Albanians were primed for a fight. In a matter of months the KLA took nominal control of more than a third of Kosovo, cutting many of the province's main highways and moving to at one point within sight of Pristina.

Meanwhile, UN and NATO demands don't seem clear. Both have assessed the situation before any military action is likely. UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan was due to report to the Council on whether Milosevic has complied with UN resolution demanding an immediate ceasefire and a negotiated solution to the crisis; and he summarised against the Serbians.

Whatever the conclusion of the current Serbian offensive, observers don't expect the KLA to disappear or the problem of Kosovo to have a final, peaceful solution in future. A force of hard core of mobile, well-equipped fighting men remains there. Reporters have found that ethnic Albanian men who were formerly apolitical, but whose villages have been recently destroyed, vow they will now join the KLA to get even. "The thing you need to know, the thing the world needs to know is that the Serbs are not destroying the KLA, they are only killing civilians and destroying villages," Gani Gecaj, a 35-year-old KLA fighter from the village of Lausa quoted to have said adding, "We are still here, still ready to fight. And when the time is right, we will strike back and the Serbs will pay." KLA commanders have announced that they are regrouping and planning to adopt more traditional guerrilla tactics.

On the other hand, delayed action of NATO and near-inaction of the UN to save the Kosovars only reassure the stepmotherly attitude of the western powers. In the past, war against Iraq, missile attacks on Sudan and Afghanistan, installation

and protection of dictatorship in Algeria didn't take much time to launch. The late decision of the UNSC has again expressed its reluctance to address the issue concerning ethnic Albanians (which is to say Muslims).

For many months, despite clear commitments to the contrary, President Clinton has stood aside as Milosevic waged a war of terror against the civilian population of Kosovo. Now there are signs that the Clinton administration may be rousing itself belatedly to action. Here also, to make matters worse, Milosevic might show a phoney last-minute concession which he had learned from Bosnia. By lowering the intensity of his military action without changing his objective Milosevic knows that a village a day will keep the West away. He has learned to play the international community like an old violin. This, however, is not the Bosnian war; it is even more complicated.

In the first place Kosovo is not a constituent state of former Yugoslavia, but a once-autonomous province of Serbia. It's not ethnically Serbian; instead 90 per cent of the Kosovars are ethnic Albanians many of who want nationhood.

According to Cyber agencies, the Kosovo conflict is not merely a conflict between the central authority and the people of its province. It has a deep-rooted history that goes back to at least 600 years. The conflict arises from deep mistrust and suspicion between the Kosovars (non-Slav Albanian Muslims) and Serbs (Slav by race and Orthodox Christians). The ani-

mosty was implanted when the Turkish Ottoman empire defeated the Serbs in Kosovo on 28 June in 1389. The Muslim Ottoman rule in the Balkans was never liked by the Serbs who conspired at various times with other European powers to expel the Turks from Europe which they succeeded in doing so only at the beginning of this century.

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There is extreme tension among all the Albanians in the region because of the violence perpetrated by the Serb-dominated armed forces of President Milosevic on the Albanian Kosovars. In Kosovo, although Serbs and Albanians live together side by side, they do not mix with each other. They may share flats in a condominium but they do not speak to each other. As one journalist reported to have said: "They occupy the space and not the place". The ethnic Albanians do not like the Serbs because of their "arrogance and nationalism". The Serbs on the other hand consider Albanians as "usurpers of Serbian territory in the Balkans. Their children go to separate schools set up by the Albanians and Serbs where they learn distorted version of history from Serbian and Albanian teachers.

For example, Serbs teach their children that during the

Turkish rule, they were oppressed and their churches were demolished and the Albanian Muslims are "foreigners and uncivilised". Albanians on the other hand teach their children the opposite version emphasising that the Serbs believe in myths and not in truth. Kosovo is their ancient land and it was forcibly occupied by Serbs who are "aggressors". This deep hatred between them could be compared to the one between Israelis and the Palestinians.

In the past, Marshall Tito was able to contain the ethnic differences and distrust by giving autonomy to the constituent states of the Federation of Yugoslavia. He created two autonomous provinces within Serbia — one in the South Kosovo and the other in the North Vovodina giving the majority ethnic groups the right of self-management without the domination of the Serbs. It suited the ethnic groups well during that time.

However, the Serbs were not happy with this arrangement. After Tito's death, the then Serbian Community Party leader Slobodan Milosevic (now the President of truncated Yugoslavia) whipped up the fervour of Serbian nationalism to the extent that all other ethnic communities within the Federation knew that this rise of Serbian nationalism would disintegrate the Federation of Yugoslavia so well managed and crafted by Tito.

The Albanians in Kosovo in one stroke were not only denied the status of autonomy in Kosovo but also their cherished wish of turning Kosovo a state within the Federation of Yugoslavia, having the same sta-

tus with other states — Slovenia, Croatia, Bosnia-Herzegovina and Montenegro. This action left the Kosovars Albanians frustrated and created more resentment and anger against the Serbs.

The Kosovars were faced with forced assimilation with the Serbs after Kosovo was merged with Serbia in 1989. Their language was not taught in the schools and they were compelled to learn Serbian language (Note: in not-too-distant past Pakistani leaders attempted to impose Urdu on us in erstwhile East Pakistan ignoring our mother tongue — Bangla). The Kosovars detested this policy of forced assimilation with the Serbs with whom they have nothing in common either in race or religion. They demanded that Kosovo be restored to its status as an autonomous province within Serbia which existed prior to 1989. Milosevic did not pay any heed to their demands. When their peaceful demands were ignored, the Albanians in Kosovo were so dejected with the result that the Albanian youth formed the Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA) to challenge the Serbs.

Despite the threat of NATO's military action, Milosevic is firm in his policy with Russia's support and he has not agreed to withdraw from Kosovo his armed forces, the heavy artillery and tanks. So long the armed forces are engaged in military operations in Kosovo against what the Serbs call "the Kosovo-terrorists", the KLA will continue to fight, and the peaceful Albanian Kosovars are becoming more and more militant day by day towards Serbs. In the meantime, NATO's

military threat appears to be replete with dangers. The military intervention in Kosovo would be a bad precedent because any such intervention would have to be preceded by an all-out bombardment in which the lives of NATO pilots would be put at risk, which would be heavily criticised in their home countries. There could be heavy loss of life among both civilian Serbs and Kosovars.

If the Kosovo tragedy seems familiar, that's because a similar sequence of events unfolded next door in Bosnia a few years ago. Like Bosnia, what started out as a political problem is now a war being treated by the West primarily as a humanitarian crisis. That's precisely what happened in Bosnia where observers, aid workers and lightly-armed UN peacekeepers dispersed across the country and soon became pawns used to stave off the air and artillery strikes that finally ended the war in its fourth year.

The Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA) "considers unacceptable any interim solution calling for Kosovo to remain under the authority or part of Serbia," the party said in a communiqué. The KLA leadership warned in its statement: "Any accord signed at any level will be considered treason."

Many Albanians are outraged by the suffering of their ethnic kins in Kosovo and by the international community's apparent willingness to tolerate Belgrade's attacks on civilians so long as the violence is contained to the province. The possibility of a "Greater Albania," of unifying a nation divided by 20th century wars and the borders they produced, animates a hard core of Albanians around the world who are prepared to fund the struggle and fight for the goal.

The West, though, is lingering military action, but what will be the aim of this action? It may have two positions on Kosovo: The first is that killing

and repression must stop. The second, Kosovo cannot have the independence which Kosovo Albanians want, at least not in the near future.

However, there are powerful arguments that suggest Kosovo has just as much right to secede from Yugoslavia as Bosnia or Croatia did, since its true status was equivalent to that of a republic before Milosevic illegally revoked it. The real reason for western worries was that they feared the contagion of ethnic Albanian self-determination would cause a chain of upsets in neighbouring countries. It is quite a legitimate fear in the interest of the West.

Now, NATO warplanes may destroy as much as possible the military infrastructure responsible for the genocidal campaign. That first step would allow humanitarian agencies to begin helping Kosovo's victims. At the same time, Kosovo's autonomy may be restored, and Kosovars given time to reconstruct their democratic institutions. After a reasonable interval, the Serbs and Kosovars may be encouraged to negotiate Kosovo's final status: Whether it remains a part of Serbia, achieves independence or settles on some in-between status, such as becoming a full-fledged republic within Yugoslavia, cannot be dictated from outside.

Many, however, slow to perceive the dimensions of the crimes perpetrated by Serbia in Bosnia are now itching to rectify that mistake by leading the US to hit Milosevic hard over Kosovo. The key administration officials should be knowing the feeling; thousands died while Washington dithered.

This time, everyone involved ought to understand that airstrike is not going to solve the crisis, but independence may.

This article was written with information available on the western electronic media and the web site of "République de Kosovo".

LETTER FROM EUROPE

Bangladesh Revisited: Prevailing Situation

by Chaklader Mahboobul Alam

Bangladesh, as a nation has indeed many blessings. There exists a strong feeling of nationhood because of ethnic, linguistic, religious and cultural homogeneity among the vast majority of the people. The hardworking resilient character of its people is a plus point... There are few countries in the world where land is so fertile that it regularly yields three crops... Then why are we not capable of getting out of this situation of chronic poverty?

AS mentioned in the first part of this article (published in The Daily Star of September 15, 1998), while flying over Bangladesh, I observed that most of the country was under flood water. Unfortunately, this phenomenon — the flood — would hold the centre stage in Bangladesh during my short stay and long after my departure. Therefore, we will be forced to come back to it again and again in this letter.

The landing as usual was perfect and on time. It took me only five minutes to go through the immigration and customs control. I remembered that in the olden days it was such a hassle to comply with these simple procedures. I still remember the almost incomprehensible forms that one had to fill out with details of foreign and local currencies in one's possession. They had to be stamped and were subject to scrutiny by corrupt officials at entry and departure. So this was a welcome change that everything went so smoothly and without any trouble. We are trying to promote tourism from Europe and America, this definitely is a step in the right direction. Next, in my opinion, would be to ease the visa restrictions even further.

As I came out of the Airport building, I observed that tall iron fences separated the different areas. Although, it was not a pleasant sight, I thought it was a good idea to take these measures with a view to introducing some order in the chaotic conditions of Dhaka Airport. One of my younger brothers together with his wife was waiting for me with a car. I was indeed very pleased to see them there. It is a wonderful feeling to find someone, especially someone so close to you as a brother, waiting for you at the airport at the end of a long trip.

Upon arrival in Dhaka, a visitor immediately becomes aware of the different modes of road transport used there and the complete lack of traffic discipline. There are cars, buses, trucks, vans, bullock carts, buffalo carts, human carts, three-wheeled autos, and of course the omnipresent light-weight cycle rickshaws, which happen to be the most popular form of transport and which, in my opinion, cause most of the major traffic jams. I have the greatest sympathy for the rickshaw drivers. Most of them are poor migrants from rural areas and work long hours to earn a precarious living, because except few lucky ones, the vast majority share their day's takings with the owners of the vehicles. In the absence of a reliable public transport system, they also render a very useful service to the public. Yet, I feel, if it were at all possible to persuade them (I must confess, I do not know how) to follow the basic traffic rules, Dhaka would be a much nicer place to live in. This does not, however, mean that the motor car drivers follow the rules either. Most of them, I found, did not know what lane discipline meant. But because of their numerical superiority over any other single form of transport and easy manoeuvrability, the rickshaws often create such bottlenecks by invading the lanes in the opposite direction that the flow of traffic comes to a complete halt in both directions. The atrocious road conditions of Dhaka and the rising flood level only made it worse to move from one place to another. I observed that the lake near the United Nations road (Baridhara) was full to the brim.

We soon arrived at our family home and were greeted with warm affection by other mem-

bers of the family. We, who have become used to the nuclear family system, are specially touched by the warmth shown by members of an extended family. Under this system, in Bangladesh, a family as a functioning social unit should also take into account a host of domestic helpers like cooks, gatekeepers, gardeners, drivers, laundry women, etc. Often there are children under sixteen, who serve at the table and perform other menial tasks. To an unaccustomed eye it comes as a shock to find bare-foot little children putting in long hours, men and women sat separately in different groups and more or less kept to themselves. These scenes raised vexing questions on gender issues in my mind. Do we, as a nation, believe in sexism? Does our belief system actively create and later sustain myths about women's role in the society basically to keep women "in their place"? Do women get a fair treatment in the society? Has religion got anything to do with this?

I discussed these questions at length with the female members of my family, some whom are doctors, engineers or teachers. Yes, the Bangladeshi society within the framework of predetermined gender roles — men work outside of their homes to earn money (market work) while women are caregivers. They are expected to stay home and take care of the house and the children (non-market work according to orthodox economic definitions). Even though in rural areas, women contribute a greater percentage of total time to the family, men play a dominant role because of their income-earning activities. This lack of economic power is definitely the major determinant of women's social inequality and this inequality is evident in almost every sphere of life in Bangladesh.

Women's wages per hour are less than male wages (Tk 2.86 vs Tk 4.31), their life expectancy is less than that of men (55.9 years v 56.8 years), their calorie intake as a percentage of minimum requirements is 47 per cent higher (75% vs 53%).

Although, in principle, the fundamental rules of Islam give equal rights to men and women and recognise a woman's right not only to own property but also to manage it independently, in Bangladesh women often suffer significant discriminations in employment, marriage, divorce and inheritance (only half of men's shares) and in their access to credit facilities from major financial institutions. So what are we doing to remedy the situation? What steps are being taken to give due consideration to the dual role of women as productive and reproductive agents of the society? In short, what are we doing for women empowerment? Actually it is heartening to note that the battle is being waged on two fronts.

The government's twenty-year Perspective Plan (1990-2010) gives due cognizance to these issues and sets clear goals to reduce female illiteracy, create job opportunities for women by giving training, give special credit and health care facilities. The role of the NGOs in improving the lot of Bangladeshi women, especially in rural areas, must not be forgotten in this context. Organizations such as the Grameen Bank and BRAC, Proshika etc. have demonstrated enormous courage and vision in their struggle for the empowerment of women economically, socially, politically and psychologically.

The morning newspapers

dren used to be served first. The women ate later. This phenomenon repeated itself again and again. Again at parties, men and women sat separately in different groups and more or less kept to themselves. These scenes raised vexing questions on gender issues in my mind. Do we, as a nation, believe in sexism? Does our belief system actively create and later sustain myths about women's role in the society basically to keep women "in their place"? Do women get a fair treatment in the society? Has religion got anything to do with this?

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The morning newspapers

brought two pieces of bad news. Number one news was that the flood situation was getting worse in 15 districts. The death toll had shot up to 80 and diarrhoea was spreading in the flood-hit areas due to the shortage of drinking water. New areas in and around the city of Dhaka had gone under water, forcing thousands to abandon their half-submerged houses and take shelter with their animals wherever they could. The Flood Forecasting and Warning Centre (FFWC) predicted further rise in water levels which would aggravate the overall situation even more. For obvious reasons, the government was still not prepared to call for international help.

The second piece of news was also quite disturbing. A university student had been picked up by the police and tortured to death under police custody for no apparent reasons. According to unofficial reports on police excesses, more than 80 people had been killed in police custody over the last 25 months. Talking to ordinary people like businessmen, shopkeepers, rickshaw drivers etc., I found that people did not have much faith either in the government bureaucrats or in the police. According to them, at every level there may be discrepancies between them. Except the State Radio and the Television, the Press is remarkably free. So in my opinion, Parliamentary Democracy in Bangladesh is not the best system for Bangladesh or not, that is quite another matter. There are Bangladeshis, who are nostalgic of the days of General Mohammad Ershad, when apparently the government machinery worked more efficiently and most of the modern infrastructure of the country was laid out. The question is, do we, as a nation want a corrupt yet efficient dictatorship or a not-so-efficient but parliamentary democracy to govern us? This indeed is a fascinating issue, which we shall address some other time.

I had wanted to pay short visits to Sylhet and Chittagong, but I could realize I had spent most of my planned stay in Bangladesh, with my family in Dhaka and it was about time for me to start preparations for my departure. Besides, I had to do some shopping for my family and friends in Europe. So I asked one of my sisters to accompany me on my shopping expedition. This, I thought, would also give me a first-hand opportunity to assess the flood situation in Dhaka. What I saw was pathetic. Most of the low-lying areas of south eastern suburbs were under water. There was water on some of the streets of the north, north western suburbs. The Buriganga had passed the danger level. Along the main streets, the flood victims who had lost their homes had built makeshift shanties, covered with plastic. There were domestic animals all over the place. No one knew how long they would survive. Yet what impressed me most was the resilient nature of the people. Unless their shops or work places were completely submerged under water, they were carrying on with their business as usual on wooden platforms.

Some of the rickshaws and small boats were doing brisk business ferrying people from one side of the half submerged street to the other. The newspapers reported that in the rural areas the situation was even worse. More than half the country was under water, many roads including part of the Dhaka-Chittagong highway and rail tracks had been inundated, thousands of schools had been damaged, there had been a huge production loss of rice crop, the garment industry (the major foreign exchange earner of Bangladesh) had suffered a serious blow, many rural dispensaries and hospitals had been affected and the communication network including telecommunications infrastructure had suffered severe deterioration. I started thinking about the effect of this disaster on the economic situation. In general and poverty alleviation programmes in particular, would it affect the future of the country?

Actually, in spite of political instability and natural disasters, Bangladesh has made significant strides in many aspects of life. The GDP has risen steadily since 1993/94 (4.2 per cent). In 1997/98, it was estimated to reach 6.0 per cent. The agriculture sector which contributes over 32 per cent of the GDP has a similar growth rate. The industrial sector's contribution which stands at approximately 19 per cent of the GDP has had a similar growth rate. Poverty line, measured in terms of calorie intake, has declined to 50 per cent in rural areas and 60 per cent in urban areas. Life expectancy has gone up. Universal compulsory free primary education has, in principle, been introduced. The per capita income has shown a steady rise since 1990. In 1971, when Bangladesh became independent, its economic situation was so bad that Bangladesh was considered as a basket case for poverty, illiteracy and overpopulation and it is to the credit of the Bangladeshis that in spite of a population increase of over 2 per cent per annum during the last 26 years, (population in 1971 was approximately 70 million and in 1997 it had risen to over 115 million) the country has made such remarkable progress. Yet according to the UNDP criteria, Bangladesh continues to be a desperately poor country and this summer's flood will push many more people under the poverty line.

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Bangladesh, as a nation has indeed many blessings. There exists a strong feeling of nationhood because of ethnic, linguistic, religious and cultural homogeneity among the vast majority of the people. The hardworking resilient character of its people is a plus point. There are few countries in the world where land is so fertile that it regularly yields three crops. If

we consider land as the country's most important natural resource, Bangladesh is in a very fortunate position because there is very little chance that its resource base will ever be depleted unless there is a natural disaster of huge magnitude. Recent reports also suggest that the country possesses significant gas reserves.

Then why are we not capable of getting out of this situation of chronic poverty? Well, if we have to identify one single factor which bears the brunt of the responsibility for this situation, then there is no doubt that it is the incessant population growth in the country. A fall in the population growth is closely linked with a rise in standard of living. In the early sixties, when Spain was considered as an under-developed country, it had one of the highest birth rates in Europe. Today, when Spain has achieved a high standard of living, its birth rate has fallen to such a level that its economic planners are concerned about the future. But this is a chicken and egg issue — which comes first. We cannot achieve a high standard of living without a low birth rate, while we cannot have a low birth rate without a high stan-

dard of living, (which also means a high level of education). This is indeed a vicious circle. Since our industry is not and will not be in a position for a long time to give employment to the excess population and large-scale emigration to other countries is not possible, it largely falls on agriculture not only to feed them, (true, at a subsistence level) but also to give whatever employment opportunities it can generate.

This is true that we have defeated the doom prophets again and again by increasing the food production. But it cannot go on for ever. If the population growth is not contained voluntarily (according to some estimates, Bangladesh will have a population of 140 million in the year 2000), I am afraid, sooner or later some sort of resource/population adjustment will be forced on us by other even more uncontrollable factors which will inevitably bring violent consequences. On the other hand, if the population can be held at its current level and the development work continues at an acceptable pace, Bangladesh's future as a happy and peaceful nation is virtually guaranteed.

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