

Confronting Ethnic Cleansing in Tetovo, Macedonia

The Issue

The term "ethnic cleansing" first gained widespread usage in the English language by way of Serbo-Croatian during the time of the war in Bosnia following the break up of Yugoslavia in the mid 1990s. It might be defined as a systematic campaign of terror waged by one ethnic group in a region in order to drive out another group that makes its home there.

The victims of ethnic cleansing in the Balkans belong to nearly every ethnic group, as do the perpetrators. Serbs have ethnically cleansed Bosnian Muslims from villages in eastern Bosnia. Croats have ethnically cleansed Serbs from the Krajina region of Croatia. Albanians have ethnically cleansed Gypsies and Serbs from Kosovo and Macedonians from western Macedonia. Greeks have for over a hundred years been engaged in a campaign of ethnic cleansing of Macedonians from northern Greece. And Macedonians are also responsible for a recent incident of ethnic cleansing, when a Macedonian mob in the central Macedonian town of Bitola burned down the shops and homes of Albanians there in retaliation for the murder of Macedonian soldiers from Bitola by Albanians in the western Macedonian town of Tetovo.

The fact that members of nearly every ethnic group have at some time victimized their neighbors has provided outsiders with an easy rationale for ignoring desperate pleas for help from individuals and communities under attack. "Those people have always been killing each other" is a mantra that is often used to drown out the cries of the victims.

For those who choose the lovely simplicity of this response, there is little that one can say or do that would stir them to action on behalf of the victims of ethnic cleansing. It is responses such as this that allowed a ship filled with thousands of Jews to be sent back to Germany from a U.S. port of entry during the height of the Holocaust. This is why 6000 unarmed men in Srebrenica, Bosnia could be slaughtered by Serbian soldiers while U.S. jet fighter planes sat idly nearby in 1995.

This is why nearly a million people of Rwanda, men, women and children, could be slaughtered by their raging neighbors while the world looked on.

Yet I know that there are those who would, in the name of justice, bear witness to such crimes against humanity. To them I offer the following documented accounts of the brutal campaign

of intimidation and murder of Macedonians in western Macedonia by organized Albanian groups. In the absence of widespread public knowledge and condemnation of the ethnic-based violence committed against these people, their suffering will only serve the aims of their tormentors. It will only serve the forced eviction of the minority ethnic Macedonian community in western Macedonia from ancestral homes in thousand-year-old settlements.

Background

The fighting in western Macedonia began as isolated attacks in the early spring of 2001 by armed and uniform wearing Albanian insurgents who claimed that their quarrel was with the government and its forces in Macedonia.

They also claimed that their goal was to achieve more equal rights for the Albanian minority population of Macedonia. However, in July of 2001 after achieving a sufficient mobilization of the local Albanian population, they began the conquest of territory where the Albanian population formed the majority.

Western journalists have continued to portray this insurgency as some kind of armed civil rights movement, but the reality on the ground is quite different. The insurgents have, in fact, achieved a permanent occupation of territory through an on-going campaign of ethnic cleansing. It is now clear that in July of 2001 there was a sudden shift in the focus of their movement from conflict with police and army units to systematic terrorization of the civilian ethnic Macedonian minority in the occupied territories.

Evidence

One of the first documented cases of such terrorization in occupied western Macedonia occurred on July 8, 2001 in the village of Neproshteno, about 7 miles north of the city of Tetovo. Thirty year old Darko Boshkovski was alone, unarmed and in civilian clothes when he was abducted from his car at a road block near his home that day. He reported that it was about 6:30 in the evening when a group of about 150 men in Albanian National Liberation Army NLA uniforms stopped his car and forced him at gun point to accompany them first to the nearby village of Poroj, and then to Drenovec 2, and finally to the village of Gjermo.

There he was locked in a horse stall with two horses. He was blindfolded and questioned about his father, a retired policeman who had worked on drug-related crimes, and his possible family connection to Interior Minister Ljube Boshkovski. Then his arms were stretched and bound behind him with a rope that also bent his back to the point where breathing was made difficult. He was then repeatedly beaten over the course of the evening by a series of men, some with fists, others with clubs or shovels. He was also tied to a horse and dragged around the barn and later force fed horse urine and dung.

About 1:30 in the morning NLA commander Avzi came and told him that they were releasing him. They then took him by car to the city of Tetovo and delivered him to his waiting family, his wife and parents, who had paid a ransom for his release. He was warned not to reveal what had happened to him under the threat of further violence.

He was later treated for numerous wounds, including serious internal injuries, at the local hospital and later at a sanatorium in Serbia. When his family was finally able to return to their home in the village months later they discovered that their house, shop and outbuildings had all been looted and burned. Darko's automobile, a tractor and all of the goods from their building supply business had been stolen.

A year later the family remains homeless and destitute. All that they had slowly built up or acquired over the years was gone. And visits to the village or nearby town are made all the more painful by the open presence, after the public amnesty of the rebels, of those who tortured him and destroyed his family's home and livelihood in western Macedonia. It wasn't just the Macedonian authorities and press who were reporting such incidents either. According to a report issued on July 26 by the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, their mission human rights specialists found evidence of numerous human rights violations by the rebel NLA forces. Their report on their meeting with three young Macedonian men who were being treated for injuries at the hospital in Tetovo on Friday, July 20, 2001 is typical of what they found during their investigation.

Although the young men refused to participate in a formal interview, the Mission report states that they were able to learn the following: "These persons appeared extremely fearful of Mission's presence, but ultimately consented to showing their injuries to the investigator. There were chafing marks on their wrists that appeared consistent with their hands being bound. By observing the pattern of the bruises and abrasions, it appeared they had been beaten whilst their hands were bound behind their backs. From the appearance of their injuries, it appeared they had been struck with rifle butts and wooden or metal rods, objects typically associated with the kinds of deep bruising observed on the subjects.

[One person stated briefly that a particular pattern of injuries had been caused by being struck with a wooden broom handle and a police baton.]

All had been beaten on the soles of their feet as well as on the back of the legs.

One had reduced kidney function upon admission, but was improving. These impressions were later confirmed in conversations with the attending doctor. It was also discovered that the 3 young men had attended an engagement party and were standing outside the house of one of them when a car with 3 armed NLA members drove up and accosted them. They were roughed up, blindfolded, and driven to a location where the beating was administered."

These two incidents were among the first of what soon proved to be a series of abductions and beatings of unarmed individuals or small groups of Macedonian civilians in the western part of the country. By July 23, the OSCE Mission had received credible information that at least 25 people had been abducted at gun point in the Tetovo region. The ethnic cultural basis for these attacks can be seen in the case of Macedonian Orthodox Christian priest Perica Bojkovski. He was first threatened by an Albanian armed group on July 14, 2001. At that time he was pulled out of his car by an armed group that blocked the road at the village of Odri. At that time men dressed in the black uniforms and wearing the insignia of the Albanian NLA beat the priest and told him not to come back to his parish.

Three weeks later on August 9 Father Bojkovski was stopped again during a visit to one of the mountain villages that were his responsibility. At the time he was riding in a car with Pero Marcheviski on the way to the village of Dobroshte. They were both dragged from the car by armed men wearing NLA uniforms. They were taken by car to the village of Djepchishte, where they were put in a barn. There they were questioned about the names of reserve policemen and the location of army and police units in the villages they visited. When their interrogators didn't receive the answers they sought, they began to beat the two men with guns and fists. They also put a gun barrel in the priest's mouth during the interrogation.

Their captors then drove them to another location in the village where about fifteen young men in civilian clothes awaited them in a cellar.

This new group continued the beating, which included demands that the priest sing Albanian nationalist songs and the call of the Moslems to worship.

Eventually the priest lost consciousness and was revived with cold water. When it was discovered that he was coughing up blood, he and his companion were driven back to the village of Dobroshte, where they were again beaten and then released at their car.

Father Bojkovski was later treated at the Military Hospital in Skopje, where doctors found injuries over the entire length of the priest's body.

This maltreatment of a cleric who carried no weapons and traveled openly in his religious dress on his priestly duties was clearly intended to intimidate the Christian Macedonians in that parish. It was meant to teach the lesson that no one from their ethnic religious cultural community was safe there any longer. Ethnic cleansing in western Macedonia by organized Albanian armed groups took on a truly mass character on the 23rd of July 2001. At that time the NLA launched a series of attacks on the mixed Macedonian-Albanian villages of Tearce and Neproshteno and the all-Macedonian village of Leshok in direct violation of a cease fire that their leadership had signed on to the preceding week. Poorly armed policemen and a few local reservists tried to defend the villages, but they were overwhelmed by the sudden onslaught of hundreds of heavily armed NLA fighters.

The NLA soldiers went door to door rousting people from their homes, from the smallest child to the oldest grandmother. Several thousand people were driven out with little or no time to gather any possessions and with little hope that there would be anything to return to later. Long lines of people, many hundreds, were forced to make their way on foot to the nearby Macedonian hamlets of Ratae and Zhilche.

Some did resist. Men who had invested years of their lives in the creation of a home, and those who could not bring themselves to abandon homesteads and communities with over a thousand years of family history in them. Some defended their homes with guns. Many resisted the invaders until it was clear that they could not win, and then they retreated along with their families.

Others resisted until they were wounded or killed by the NLA. About a dozen men of Leshok and Neproshteno were wounded that day and one, Gjoko Lazarevski, died from his wounds. He was 30 years old. He had just completed construction of a new home, and he was soon to be married.

The NLA aggression and ethnic cleansing of Leshok, Gjoko Lazarevski's home village, was among the most indefensible acts of the recent conflict.

The aggression took place in direct violation of a cease-fire agreement signed by the NLA with NATO mediation. It involved the occupation of a village that had never had a single Albanian inhabitant in its several thousand year history. It resulted in the criminal looting and destruction of the lifelong personal possessions and property of all of the residents.

The NLA would later, completely outside the military conflict, set explosive charges under the foundation of a Macedonian and world cultural monument in Leshok, a beautiful Orthodox church, first built in the 14th century and expanded into a grand cathedral in the 20th century, reducing the Church of St. Atanasij to a pile of rubble. And one young man who tried to resist this ethnic cleansing was made the ultimate example of what resistance would bring, when he paid with his life.

The campaign of ethnic cleansing that day also included one of the worst crimes of terror imaginable, the abduction that ends in disappearance of individuals from a community. On July 23, 2001 NLA gunmen abducted 52 year old Cvetko Mihajlovski from a wheat field near his home in the village of Neproshteno. At the same time they took his 37 year old son Vasko, whose wedding had taken place the night before, and an elderly neighbor, 69 year old Krsto Gogovski, from their homes in the same village. They were led at gunpoint in some unknown direction and have never been reliably heard from since.

That same day 62 year old Dimo Dimoski, who was visiting his wheat field in the neighboring settlement of Djepchishte, was also taken by NLA gunmen.

And the next day 60 year old Sime Jakimovski was literally taken off the street of a suburb of Tetovo called Drenovec 1. The day after that, July 26, 2001, in that same northern suburb of Tetovo, where some of the most heated fighting between NLA and government troops would occur, 47 year old Gjoko Sinadinovski and 28 year old Bobi Jeftimovski were taken. Elsewhere on that same day the NLA apparently also took 48 year old Ilko Trajchevski and his 25 year old son Vasko Trajchevski. Two weeks later, also in the vicinity of Drenovec, two brothers, 59 year old Slavko and 42 year old Boshko Dimitrievski were taken by the NLA.

The families and friends of these 12 men have endured over a year of agony-filled uncertainty concerning the fate of their loved ones. NLA commanders claim no knowledge of these men. Swedish Ambassador to Macedonia Lars Wahlund recently headed an international commission to determine the facts of some 20 cases of unsolved abductions during the time of the conflict last year. His commission concluded that NLA commanders probably know the fate of the Macedonians abducted, and Macedonian officials may know the fate of several missing Albanians and a Bulgarian, but no one will reveal what they know.

Angelina Mihajlovska has waited for over a year for news of her husband Vasko. The day after their wedding she and her husband and most of the guests at their wedding were kidnapped by the NLA. She and some others were released after three days. But there is a rumor that she received her husband's ear and a hand later from local NLA commander Leka. This was said to be in retaliation for Vasko having pulled a gun on Leka when he and his men appeared at their wedding. The commission concluded that it was likely that Leka in particular does know the fate of 8 of the Macedonian men seized in his district of operations in July of 2001. Several bodies exhumed from a site near Neproshteno, according to the commission report may yet prove to be some of the missing. But people like Angelina Mihajlovska have no choice but to continue a campaign of public protest before the public, the government and the international community in Macedonia until the fate of their loved ones is resolved.

And today they must occasionally pass amnestied NLA leaders such as commander Leka on the streets, men who probably know of their missing men even if they are not directly responsible for their fate.

During the six month's of the open conflict 15 civilians from the Tetovo region are known to have been killed and many others injured. The dead included Naca and Petar Petrovski, a mother and son whose car hit a land mine set by Albanian rebels on the road between Leshok and Zhilche in mid July of 2001. It also included the particularly gruesome murder of two night custodians at the Hotel Brioni in the village of Chelopek. One night late in August Albanian gunmen appeared at this Macedonian-owned business. They took the two hotel employees present at the time prisoner, named Svetislav Trpkovski and Bogoslav Ilievski. They then

mined the premises with explosive charges and blew up the hotel, at the same time killing the two workmen, who they had tied up and left inside the building to die.

Other grisly crimes committed against Macedonian civilians by armed Albanian groups during this period included the abduction and torture on August 8, 2001 of four construction workers from a site on the Tetovo-Skopje highway.

These four men, who were later released, reported to authorities that in addition to beatings, they were subjected to sexual abuse by their Albanian captors, and in a final act of barbarism before letting them go, they carved the initials of the rebel group into the living flesh of the backs of their captives with knives.

Abductions, robberies and brutal beatings of unarmed civilians in the Tetovo region have continued since the open conflict ended in the fall of 2001.

On the 3rd of November 2001, for example, 32 year old Cane Trpevski was returning to his home in the village of Ratae from Tetovo, where he had gone to pick up his monthly wages, when he was captured by an armed Albanian group. They robbed him and then held him for two days. During that time they beat him over the entire length of his body, while keeping his hands tied and with a feed sack placed over his head. He reported that the worst part of his ordeal had been the fact that during that entire time they had refused to give him a single drop of water to drink.

Reserve policeman Dushko Simoski received similar treatment as recently as April 14, 2002, when he was taken prisoner by an armed Albanian group in the village of Shemshevo. They also held him bound and blindfolded in a livestock stall, while brutally beating him for over two days, before he was finally released. Of course, active policemen and soldiers of the Macedonian army have suffered their share as well at the hands of Albanian armed groups, but at least their suffering came in the course of their sworn service, for which they are honored today for their sacrifices.

The continued campaign of terror, death and destruction includes the looting and burning of over thirty churches in the Tetovo region since hostilities began last spring and many hundreds of houses. As recently as this past month the looting and destruction of Macedonian homes continued in outlying villages such as Otunje or Varvara, and even certain Tetovo neighborhoods continue to lose residents who find life unbearable there.

It also includes the destruction of many Macedonian-owned businesses, thus denying the people their livelihoods. These have included destruction of a textile factory and bakery in the village of Tearce, small shops, restaurants and gas stations in Tetovo, and the infamous destruction of the Brioni Hotel in the village of Chelopek. Of course, many thousands of people were denied their livelihood simply because they did not dare to go to work this past year.

Farmers couldn't reach their fields and other workers couldn't drive the roads to various workplaces. And the Popova Shapka major ski center on the picturesque mountain above Tetovo had no tourist season this past year.

Conclusions

While the practice of ethnic cleansing is universally condemned as a crime against an entire people, it is rarely ever stopped or reversed once it begins somewhere. The fear and hatred that it creates only serves to accelerate the further division of the ethnic communities. It takes some enormous effort of public will and the expenditure of considerable resources by a society or state or the international community to halt the process.

Therefore, it is particularly important at this time that Macedonians, inside and outside the country, consider carefully whether they are willing to support their countrymen trapped today in the tragedy of the on-going ethnic cleansing of the Tetovo region. Real security must be reestablished there. Schools, churches, businesses and homes must be rebuilt. Hope for a peaceful and prosperous future there must be restored.

However, this will only be possible with money and support from outside.

The Macedonians of Tetovo cannot do it by themselves. And so far they have mainly received only "lip service" from concerned government agencies, including the international community. Far too little help has actually reached them. As a result, Macedonians continue to offer their property for sale in predominantly Albanian areas, with the aim to leave Tetovo and their unhappy memories of recent life there forever behind them.

This is something that should concern all Macedonians. All who take some pride in the language, the history, the culture, the land and the people, should consider what kind of a Macedonian homeland will remain if the historically Macedonian, resource rich Tetovo region loses its entire Macedonian population and is finally traded off in a "land for peace" arrangement not unlike the one that Israelis and Palestinians are slowly being drawn into. Only a long-term effort by the entire Macedonian community can possibly avert such a disaster from happening. There certainly are things that each of us can do individually, and things that we can do collectively. Victor Bivell has suggested one of the most important of these in his recent article, "Restoring Peace and Prosperity to Macedonia - The Rule of Numbers", where he urges serious consideration of how to facilitate the return of Macedonian emigres and their off-spring to their homeland. But this must include some serious consideration of how to facilitate return to places such as Tetovo, where Macedonians today understandably look only for ways to escape.

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