

THE WORLD; THE BALKANS; Status: The Kosovo Issue That Just Won't Go Away

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Los Angeles Times - Los Angeles, Calif.

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Date: Mar 4, 2001

Start Page: M.2

Section: Opinion; PART- M; Opinion Desk

Text Word Count: 786

Document Text

Via the Internet, cell phones, satellite dishes and members of the burgeoning international community who arrived after the war in 1999, Pristina is connected to the world. In the morning rush hour, every third car on Mother Teresa Boulevard is a four-wheel-drive vehicle from the United Nations, the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, the NATO-led KFOR peacekeeping force or the almost 300 nongovernmental organizations that have descended on Kosovo. Yet, Kosovar residents of this mountainous region are trapped. Most do not have passports or drivers' licenses or any of the identification taken and destroyed by the Yugoslav army during the war two years ago.

The lack of documents is emblematic of the difficulties facing this U.N.-administered area of some 2 million people. To get a passport, one must be a citizen of a country. Even if the new government in Belgrade were to reissue the passports its army destroyed, Kosovar Albanians no longer recognize Belgrade's authority over them. To get a driver's license, one has to have a functioning government with recognized powers. Though Kosovo completed municipal elections in October, the international community has not yet held the promised general elections to establish a regional government. Kosovar Albanians are pressing elections for spring, but the Serbs and international community appear to be delaying.

The majority of Kosovar Albanians, including former guerrilla leaders, have embraced the democratic system rather than violence. But fighting in the northern town of Kosovska Mitrovica, the southern Presevo Valley region of Kosovo and Serbia and northern Macedonia have raised alarms. Low-grade guerrilla warfare on the borders threatens stability. It also threatens to divert the international community from pressing ahead to ensure autonomy and self-government for Kosovo.

The secret everyone knows, but the international community is reluctant to confront, is that Kosovar Albanians, who make up more than 90% of the population, want to separate from Belgrade and eventually establish an independent state. With the arrival of the new U.N. administrator in Kosovo, Hans Haekkerup, and with the new parliament now adjourned in Belgrade, it is time to face this difficult issue.

"Nobody wants to pressure [Yugoslav President Vojislav] Kostunica," said a senior U.N. political advisor, "but any federation is not a lasting solution. It is impossible for Kosovo. Serbia still has the notion of 'Greater Serbia.' We are in 'Alice in Wonderland' here in Kosovo, where we have to run just to stay in place. There is no serious employment, no economy--80% unemployment and 50% of the population is under the age of 25.

"My worst fear is that people will lose trust in the international presence. Kosovars will start to see it like the occupying forces of Belgrade."

Since the U.N. arrived in Kosovo in June 1999, roads have been repaired, land mines removed, schools and hospitals opened, the currency stabilized through adoption of the German mark and successful local elections held. The next stage of progress, however, must include establishing a functioning judiciary, drafting laws, including safeguards for minority rights, and igniting the economy, including protection for investment and private property. Without these, no investment will be attracted to the area, and the economy will continue to stagnate. All these developments are impeded because of the absence of an elected regional government and are hostage to the question of final status.

"Kosovo is drifting," said Bob Churcher, the director of the International Crisis Group in Kosovo. "Without some resolution of status, we are going nowhere."

Kosovars have no regionally elected representative to speak on their behalf with the international community or with Belgrade. If there is no government to build with, no economy to work in, no public or private enterprise to absorb the aspirations and energy of the people, especially the youth, further disturbances are likely. While the international community is focused on security, Kosovars are preoccupied with the question of status. Progress will come only if the two agendas can overlap and democratic regional government, including security and protection of minority rights, can emerge. Otherwise, Kosovo risks becoming a colony of the international community.

U.N. Resolution 1244, which calls for autonomy and self-government, "is a plastic bag; you can read it how you want," says OSCE official Vjosa Dobruna. "We have no labor law or regulations. The whole population is without a contract. But if we write a law, we have to know future status. Time is running. [Kosovska] Mitrovica and Presevo Valley show the clock is ticking."

Credit: Joanne Leedom-Ackerman recently returned from Kosovo. She is a member of the board of trustees of the International Crisis Group

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