



KOSOVO CONTEMPLATES LIFE WITHOUT PEACEKEEPERS

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Before there was Iraq or Afghanistan, the world's attention was focused on Kosovo, a small area in Eastern Europe where fighting between Albanians and Serbs threatened to destabilize the entire region.

This week, the United Nations opened negotiations over the future of Kosovo, six years after taking charge of the war-torn province.

The United Nations Mission in Kosovo (UNMIK) is an international governing and security force that is keeping peace in Kosovo, which is legally still a part of Serbia, despite a majority Albanian population that wants independence.

Kosovo's history of strife

Kosovo has been the site of cultural clashes between Serbians and Ethnic-Albanians since the 1940s. These clashes were suppressed when Kosovo was a province of a larger Communist country called Yugoslavia.

When the power of the Yugoslavian communist party began to fail in the 1990s, the country broke apart, creating the now independent nations of Bosnia Herzegovina, Slovenia, Croatia and Macedonia. Yugoslavia continued to exist, but now was only made up of Serbia, Montenegro and the turbulent region of Kosovo.

In 1990 Kosovar leaders, who were ethnically Albanian and largely Muslim, declared independence in response to a series of anti-Kosovo measures taken by the Yugoslav government.

Later an armed group called the Kosovo Liberation Army began to carry out regular attacks on Yugoslav government officials and security forces.

In the months and years that followed, the KLA and the Yugoslav government carried out thousands of attacks and raids.

Open fighting and claims of atrocities and terrorism were leveled against government forces and the Kosovar rebels.

Support for an international military response was fueled by reports of 'ethnic cleansing' by the Yugoslav government and reached a new level following the killing of 45 Ethnic Albanians in the town of Racak in January of 1999. The Kosovo Verification Mission reported that among the dead were several elderly men, three women and a 13 year old boy.

International forces enter the fray

In March of 1999, when talks between Yugoslav and Albanian negotiators broke down, NATO forces – primarily the United States, Britain and Germany -- began a bombing campaign to oust the largely Serbian forces under the command of Yugoslav President Slobodan Milosevic.

The bombing campaign proved successful, and the Yugoslav forces pulled out of the region.

Later, Yugoslavia would cease to exist, becoming the nation of Serbia and Montenegro. Milosevic was forced from office and is now standing trial for war crimes committed during the 1999 fighting.

By July of 1999, UNMIK was established to provide civil administration, security, and to rebuild the institutions that Kosovo needed to establish a democratic government and a stable economy.

Nearly all of the 800,000 ethnic-Albanian refugees who had fled the region returned to Kosovo, but only a few of the 200,000 Serbian refugees made their way back.

Now, 90 percent of the population of Kosovo is ethnic-Albanian, with roots in the Albanian language and the Islamic religion.

Creating a future without peacekeepers

A U.N. representative is expected to meet with parties on both sides before presenting a plan that would grant Kosovo a kind of conditional independence.

The Serbian minority in Kosovo is looking anxiously at the talks. Most are spread throughout the country, living in small enclaves protected by international forces. In March of 2004, riots broke out after a drive-by shooting, and the drowning of three Albanian children. At least 28 people were killed and thousands were left homeless.

A Kosovo free of international peacekeepers would leave the country's 100,000 Serbs with little recourse if violence resurfaces, especially if the region becomes an independent, ethnic Albanian-dominated country, Serbian leaders warn.

Kosovo's Ethnic Albanian Prime Minister Bajram Kosumi said international "observers" would monitor the civil rights of ethnic minorities within Kosovo.

According to a poll commissioned by U.N. and U.S. aid agencies, 90 percent of Albanians in Kosovo say they want independence from Serbia.

The Serbian prime minister says he is open to an agreement, but will not accept Kosovo's independence.

--Compiled by David Belt for Online NewsHour

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