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VIOLENCE IN KOSOVO AND THE WAY AHEAD

Harald Schenker

Summary

The events of 17-19 March 2004 have shocked both the international community and local institutions: protests against the alleged killing of three ethnic Albanian children escalated into violent clashes between ethnic Albanians and Serbs, and clashes with the international peacekeeping forces in Kosovo, UN Police and the NATO-led Kosovo Force (KFOR).

The past four years seemed to be characterised by relatively positive developments in Kosovo. However, the recent troubles that left over 28 civilians and 1 KFOR soldier dead and hundreds wounded, 3,600 Serbs displaced, 30 Serbian churches and 200 Serbian houses destroyed, show that current policies on the international and local sides will have to be examined and revised and that, generally, much remains to be done in Kosovo for sustainable peace and genuine development.

The fact that Kosovo Albanian leaders were as surprised by the events as the international community seems to indicate that the origins of the event are to be found below the political level and beyond the control of the political parties. In spite of their public appeals to stop the violence, the leadership failed to fully acknowledge responsibility and to deal with events appropriately, without relating the violence to issues of independence and transfer of competences.

The events also indicate that the optimistic analysis of Kosovo's current situation needs revisiting. Consequently, security policy and relations between the United Nations Interim Administration Mission in Kosovo (UNMIK) and Kosovo's Provisional Institutions of Self-Government (PISG) have to be reconsidered.

It is too early to tell what exactly will be the consequences of events on UNMIK and PISG policies and activities, especially regarding the standards implementation plan and, more generally, the future of the province. A careful review of the political and security situation and of the roles of the parties involved should be encouraged.

Origins of and reporting on the violence

On 15 March 2004, a Kosovo Serb teenager was wounded in a drive-by shooting in the village of Lapje Selo, 6 km from the capital Pristina, allegedly by ethnic Albanians. The ethnic Serb residents living in these areas reacted by blocking two main transport routes in Kosovo, Pristina-Skopje and Pristina-Gjilan/Gniljane. The blocks caused considerable disturbance.

On 16 March 2004, three ethnic Albanian boys from the village of Cabra drowned in the Ibar river, near the divided town of Mitrovica, in the north of Kosovo. The fourth boy, who survived, told that his younger brother and friends jumped into the river to escape ethnic Serbs from a neighbouring village who were chasing them with a dog. Although these two events have not been officially linked, they set the stage for a general outburst of protest in

Kosovo. UNMIK Police now believe that the story of the boys being chased into the river Ibar by Serbs with dogs is not true.

The boy who survived was shown on national television with stories of how he tried in vain to save his 9-year-old brother. It was an emotional story which ignited an outbreak of both emotions and violent acts. Television stations then sent reporters to locations like the Assembly of Kosovo and interviewed anyone they could find. These interviews tended to be inflammatory, as were newspaper articles in Kosovo dailies. The Temporary Media Commissioner issued a public warning to broadcasters to act responsibly and consequently monitored the main Television broadcasters, concluding that they acted professionally, albeit with some exceptions. On the second day of the violent outbreaks, newspaper coverage improved and became more moderate, with the exception of the coverage in *Bota Sot*, a newspaper associated with the Democratic League of Kosovo (LDK). Opinions are divided as to whether the protests were organised. Some analysts say that it was only bad and fateful combinations of events, while others, mainly internationals, regard the fact that the violence erupted simultaneously in different places all over Kosovo as proof of a careful and synchronised organisation of events.

Protests: 17 March 2004

On 17 March 2004, a large protest of ethnic Albanian residents started in the southern part of the town of Mitrovica. In similar fashion, the ethnic Serb residents from the northern part of Mitrovica gathered close to the dividing bridge. Very soon protesters on both sides started throwing stones and the situation escalated into an open conflict during which several Albanians and Serbs died and several hundreds were wounded. All the fighting took place close to or on the bridge dividing the two sides.

Some analysts believe that had there been no blocking of the roads inside Kosovo by ethnic Serbs, the protest in Mitrovica would have remained isolated,. In other towns, there might have been protests as well, but limited to stones and clashes with police.

The protest in Prishtina began quietly, but quickly the mass moved towards the quarter of Caglavica in an attempt to break defensive barricades which Kosovo Serbs had erected. As in Mitrovica, this escalated into clashes between Albanian and Serb civilians. Caught by surprise, police and KFOR had problems keeping order, thus opening the way to both sides for an armed and open conflict.

As the events described above were being broadcast live on television gangs of teenage boys contacted one another via mobile phone and the events took on an increasingly organised air. By early afternoon, all major cities in Kosovo were caught in protests, including Gjilan/Gniljane, Prizren, Ferizaj/Urosevac, Fushe Kosove/Kosovo Polje, Peja/Pec, Gjakova/Dakovica, Lipjan/Lipljan, and Viti/Vitina.

The protests were marked by violent incidents throughout Kosovo, mainly crowds of Kosovo Albanians attacking Kosovo Serb villages. Churches and houses were set on fire, and up to 1500 Kosovo Serbs were evacuated to safe centres. UNMIK Police were also targeted in certain places, and 72 UNMIK vehicles were destroyed.

Protests: 18 March 2004

It is widely believed that the protests that took place on 18 March 2004 were organised and their sole objective was attacking Kosovo Serb property. The protests of the second day were less numerous, and protesters were predominantly youngsters. These protests often involved lootings and stonings. The political leaders of Kosovo, now better prepared, tried hard through media and site visits to calm the masses and convince them to disperse, but to little avail. While all major towns were affected by these protests as well, the casualties were fewer and the Police and KFOR were better prepared than they had been on the previous day.

Conclusions:

The final death toll is now estimated by UNMIK at 28, with at least 500 injured.

Kosovo Albanian leaders were equally as surprised as the international community by the events. While the general situation in Kosovo enjoyed a rather optimistic assessment recently, several factors have been left out of sight:

- The underlying level of politically motivated violence in Kosovo has not been addressed appropriately by UNMIK police and KFOR. Occasional outbursts, killings of politicians etc. have been seen as isolated incidents, while the larger picture has been neglected. Links between political violence and organised crime are alleged, but little is done about it. The lack of integration within KFOR leads to a considerable imbalance regarding the access to information between US and European partners. UNMIK police is not efficient in combating organised crime in Kosovo and enjoys very little support in doing so from international bodies (e.g., INTERPOL, EUROPOL). Efforts to combat organised crime in the entire region are feeble generally, despite verbal commitments.
- The lack of significant improvement in the relations between UNMIK and PISG represents a risk factor. The impression, not only of Kosovo's public opinion, but also of many analysts is that UNMIK is operating in a world of its own, where the hope prevails that reports about progress would generate progress. This situation and the tendency of Kosovo politicians to be concerned with issues of independence, borders and the like rather than with the issues of day-to-day politics has generated frustration on both sides of the imposed partnership.
- The Kosovo Protection Corps (KPC or TMK) has been given a degree of autonomy which makes it difficult to control. Its very existence has been a sign of weakness of the international community in dealing with the decommissioning of the Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA). Attempts to present the KPC as the core of a future Kosovo army as well as numerous statements of its command structures present reasons for concern. The role of the KPC (or its members) in the 2000/2001 conflicts in Southern Serbia and Macedonia is not discussed or analysed in public, thus opening space for glorification on one side and demonisation on the other.
- The tolerance of a KLA cult in Kosovo's society continues to present a destructive factor, which can only be addressed with unpopular means.

The nationalist rhetoric of the Serbian government and opposition have also contributed to raising simmering tensions. The fact that during the rampage in Belgrade not even the popular

bishop Artemije, one of the leading radicals in the Serbian Orthodox Church, managed to stop the mob from setting fire on the mosque is worrying.

The fact that the protests enjoyed no support from the Kosovo mainstream political leaders points to origins in structures within society below the political level and beyond the direct control of the main political parties. Most of the violence was committed by teenage gangs, communicating by mobile phone. It is believed that the protest were being organised by extreme parties with little or no representation in the Parliament.

The events in both Kosovo and Serbia show that there is a critical mass of mainly young people who can easily be mobilised and utilised for atrocities by whoever has the interest to do so. The events indicate the existence of informal networks the operations of which are facilitated by electronic communication devices.

In numerous interviews and public addresses, Kosovo Albanian leaders called for calm and an immediate end to the protests. However, they did not condemn inter-ethnic violence and committed grave mistakes in connecting this massive wave of violence with the issues of independence and transfer of competencies in the reserved areas of power. The Parliamentary Assembly publicly considered Serbian parallel structures responsible for the events. These inappropriate reactions underline the need for the leadership to move beyond moral condemnations towards a true understanding of the consequences of their words and the importance of taking decisive steps towards reconciliation. Additionally, the unconstructive role of media, and religious leaders needs to be addressed.

In the views of some analysts, the real target of the Kosovo events was the international community, with the ethnic cleansing a side-effect. The killing of two UNMIK police one week after the events seems to support this line of argument. The Bosnian experience should have shown UNMIK and KFOR that the image of a liberator can easily turn. Attacks on UNMIK have occurred before and little consequences have been noticed.

At the same time, it is equally plausible to assume that moderate Kosovo politicians were an indirect target of the violent events, in an attempt to discredit their policy of dialogue and compromise. In future, it will be important to underline that this moderation is the only way forward and that deviation from a path of dialogue would compromise the future of the province. Several intergovernmental organisations, like NATO, the European Union, the OSCE and the Council of Europe have already called on Kosovo Albanian leaders to take up their responsibility in ensuring peace and reconciliation.

It is too soon to assess the long-term effects of these events on the UNMIK administration, particularly upon the flagship policies of implementation of the jointly agreed Standards to be implemented by mid 2005 and Kosovo-Belgrade Direct Dialogue, but also on the co-operation between UNMIK and PISG. In any case, it is obvious that the events have caused considerable political and psychological damage.

It is expected that UNMIK will soon appear with a plan of concrete political measures to be discussed with the Kosovo Government. Beyond the prosecution of those directly responsible for the violence, these measures are not yet known,. Similarly, while a re-evaluation of relations between UNMIK and PISG has been announced, no further details are available.

The PISG have been affected by a similar shock, with some politicians calling for a redefinition of relationships between the PISG and UNMIK. Blaming UNMIK for incompetence and failure to keep order, the PISG are calling for the end of parallel structures

(Serb institutions in Kosovo supported by Serbia's government) and the return of displaced Serbs to their homes and to local institutions. The Government has created an emergency fund to rebuild houses and churches that were damaged during the protests.

Finally, UN Special Representative Holkeri's letter to the people of Kosovo shows signs of resignation, ignoring that these can be interpreted as signs of weakness by those who stand behind last week's events. Recent statements by Holkeri expressing doubts about the viability of the multiethnic concept have been quoted extensively in Serbian media, lending support to elements in Belgrade anxious to explore options such as partition and cantonisation.