

Early Warning and “Ethnic” Conflict Management: Rwanda and Kosovo

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Abstract

The author examines the way in which past conflicts shape the responses to current crises. In examining the facts of the Rwandan case compared with what is known of the Kosovo crisis, he identifies a number of similarities shared in both contexts. However, these first order similarities prove to be outweighed by the differences in the capacity for control possessed by Milosevic, the ethnic and demographic composition of the communities in the conflict, and military capabilities. Importantly, levels of public support for action were higher in the case of Kosovo, as were the steps taken by the international community in the leadup to the bombing.

Résumé

L'auteur examine de quelle façon les conflits du passé contribuent à configurer la réponse aux crises présentes. Comparant les faits du cas rwandais à ce que l'on connaît pour le moment de la crise du Kosovo, il identifie un certain nombre de similarités se manifestant dans les deux contextes. En même temps, ces similarités de première analyse s'avèrent fortement contrebalancées par d'importantes différences: la capacité qu'a Milosevitch de garder la situation sous son contrôle, la composition ethnique et démographique des communautés en conflit, les capacités militaires. Fait crucial: l'appui public apporté à une intervention active fut supérieur dans le cas du Kosovo, et les mesures prises par la communauté internationale, qui allaient mener vers les bombardements, furent conséquemment plus fermes.

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Politicians and armies are said to always be fighting the last war rather than the one at hand. More recently, the same has been said of humanitarian organizations. Contrary to those who say that we do not learn from the past, we do. As Bill Richardson said, “We must avoid the mistakes of the past.” But perhaps, following this dictum, we learn only to handle the latest crisis as if it were the last one. Thus, the West handled the Rwanda crisis as if it was going to be another Somalia: they did not want to get involved. Now, many are saying that the West is handling the Kosovo crisis as if it was another Rwanda—only this time, the same states that twiddled their thumbs while at least a half million Tutsi were slaughtered are now dropping bombs on Serbia so that no one could say that they did nothing this time. Yet nothing was done when, in 1989, Milosevic stripped the region of the political autonomy Kosovo had enjoyed under the 1974 constitution.

In fact, there are many similarities between the present crisis in Yugoslavia and the one before it in Rwanda. Both countries were run by elected dictators. Both had a legacy of nationalist authoritarianism. To the political culture of both, the concept of a loyal opposition would have been odd. Both countries lacked a strong middle class. Both countries had a well-developed opposition that had put considerable pressure on the regimes for reform. The dominant extremist Hutu tried to eliminate the Tutsi from Rwanda, whereas the dominant Serbs are trying to eliminate the Kosovars from Yugoslavia.

In both cases, there was plenty of early warning of the intentions and activities of the dominant group actively abusing the human rights of the minority. As the Transnational Foundation stated in its August 17, 1998 Report, “no outbreak of violence on earth was more predictable than the one in Kosovo.”

Indeed, there were more early warnings about this conflict than any other. On September 22, 1998, Pentagon spokesperson Kevin Bacon said that the most immediate threat was a large humanitarian disaster. Further, at that time a civil war had developed under the cover of which abuses escalated.

A large internally displaced population and a large refugee population were produced in both conflicts. There were anticipations of massive violence aimed against the minority, but in neither case did most observers predict the extent of the genocide and ethnic cleansing, respectively, that did actually occur. In fact, Dr. Oberg, of the Transnational Foundation and a staunch critic of the Albanian separatists, asked rhetorically, “Can about 1.5 million people be cleansed? Is that Serbia’s goal and, if so, would Serbia be allowed to by the international community?” Evidently, the answer is “yes,” if the international community followed Dr. Oberg’s advice. One year before the mass movement, on May 6, 1998, a report of the International Crisis group, “Again, The Invisible Hand,” stated:

there exists the danger of huge population shifts. Thousands of Albanians might leave Serbia proper for Kosovo, Albania or other destinations. Many members of the Serb minority in Kosovo might flee their homes or Serbia and points west.

Ethnic cleansing and population exchanges were widely favoured in Belgrade intellectual circles.

In both cases, there were clear and unequivocal warnings that peacekeeping forces would be targeted for reprisals. In Rwanda, it cost 10 Belgian Blue Berets their lives. In Macedonia, three U.S. peacekeepers were kidnapped. In both cases, a flurry of international diplomatic activity preceded the final outbreak of all-out violence and the involvement of external military forces.

There are other, more eerie coincidental similarities. In January of 1993, an international human rights investigation team reported on what appeared to be a genocide in Rwanda, though the phrase was subsequently withdrawn in the published report. Five years later, in January of 1998, the U.S. Department of State Country Report on Human Rights in Serbia accused the Serbian police of committing the most widespread and worst abuses of human rights against as much as that 90 percent of the Kosovar population that consisted of Albanian Muslims.¹ On March 9, 1998, Serb police buried 46 Albanians—including 14 women and 12 children—killed during the crackdown in Drenica (the highland area in northern Kosovo), following a February ambush by KLA that killed four Serbian police officers.

In both countries, a peace agreement was tantalizingly near—the Arusha Accords in the Rwandan crisis and the Rambouillet Agreement for Kosovar. There were, of course, dissenters from both agreements. The delegation from the governmental side of Rwanda was divided, and it faced a united and disciplined negotiating team representing the Rwanda Patriotic Front. But the Rambouillet process did not produce an agreement. The Albanians wanted to think some more, and Thaci refused to put his signature to the agreement without further consultations or a guarantee of a referendum in three years. Milosevic seemed to have been saved by Albanian indecisiveness, and the Americans were frustrated at their inability to fulfil their threat to bomb Belgrade into peace. Clearly, the Yugoslav government had no interest in, or intention to sign, the agreement: at the beginning of March, 4,500 Yugoslav troops and 60 tanks were assembled on the Kosovo border to launch an offensive. More telling, Milosevic increased his internal security forces to 28,000.

Could anyone be surprised about what was about to occur, given the evidence of the past? This was particularly true since the NATO resolve to launch air strikes was widely reported as faltering. As the International Crisis Group reported (Report No. 5), "With the cam-

paigned against both airstrikes and NATO ground troops growing stronger in some Western capitals, the likelihood that NATO forces will strike if Belgrade refuses once more, is looking less likely by the day." The effort to once again bring Milosevic "on side", with Senator Dole's last minute mission, was viewed as one more bow before the all-powerful Milosevic.

In the former Yugoslavia, when the talks began in the castle near Paris on Saturday February 6, 1999, the Kosovars were divided in dealing with the Serbian central government. But the Yugoslav army was similarly divided. In January of 1998, General Momcilo Perisic, who had bombarded the Bosnian city of Mostar in 1992, moved into the peace camp. However, on November 24, 1998, Milosevic dismissed him, replacing him with a complete loyalist, Gen. Lt. Dragoljub Ojdanic. The dismissal gave rise to widespread speculation about the shakiness of the regime. James Rubin, the U.S. State Department Spokesman, offered such a suggestion in his press conference on December 2, 1998. Djukanovic and Zoran Djindjic, leader of the Democratic Party in Serbia, both viewed the firing as an effort of Milosevic's to shift his base of power from the parliament to the military and security forces.² This thesis about the politicization of the Yugoslav armed forces seems to be supported by the solid evidence that, as in Rwanda, the armed forces are infiltrated with extremists, spies, and a secret police controlled by a small faction in the country. This situation reinforced the conviction that Milosevic was about to launch a scorched earth policy against Kosovo. Shades of Rwanda. The Rwandan army had also been divided between those ready to make peace and elements controlled by extremists. There, Bugosora out-manuevered the peace camp and took effective control over the armed forces. And sure enough, in Yugoslavia the end of Rambouillet marked the beginning of the Belgrade assault on Kosovo, an assault which started before NATO began its bombing campaign several weeks later. Serbian troops with heavy artillery entered Kosovo "in rou-

tine winter exercises," along with 20 Yugoslav army companies—six times that allowed by the cease-fire agreement. By the middle of March, heavy fighting had broken out in Kacanik in the south, Vucetrin in the north and around the old town of Prizen in the southwest (Institute for War and Peace Reporting). OSCE, instead of verifying a peace agreement, were confirming widespread and systematic acts of violence.

Though an opposition press and radio emerged in both Rwanda and Serbia, particularly after the 1996–97 demonstrations in Serbia, media (radio in Rwanda and television in Serbia) was used to control and unite the country in opposition to a demonized enemy. In Rwanda, the Habyarimana family and allies controlled the key media outlets—newspapers and radio. In Serbia, just when Milosevic held his historic meeting with Ibrahim Rugova in May of 1998, the suppression of the media began with the cancellation of the licenses of a number of radio and TV stations, and with an astronomical increase in the monthly fees of the few allowed to operate. Thus, the monthly fee of the most independent of stations, Radio B-92, was raised from \$200 to \$12,000. Almost a million US dollars in fines were levied against various newspapers, radio and TV stations—aside from the prison sentences against prominent journalists and editors.³

In Rwanda, the evil demons were the Tutsi. In Serbia, it was the Kosovars and their NATO allies and supporters. The propaganda was so effective that in Serbia, a large percentage of the population, including human rights and peace advocates in Belgrade, claimed that the ethnic cleansing in Kosovo was a public relations fraud perpetrated by NATO. All out war was used as the pretext and cover to close down all opposition outlets, including B-92 in Belgrade, the only non-partisan broadcast outlet.

In both cases, an international contact group had been very active in the pursuit of peace. The proposed peace agreements had called for the presence of observers to help with implementation. In Rwanda, the Force Commander,

General Dallaire, had insisted that a small but effective and well-equipped force could stop the genocide. In Kosovo, as early as October 6, Western envoys made clear that NATO intervention "could actually lead to more violence between Serb forces and ethnic Albanians," and that only sending in large numbers of ground troops could prevent the ethnic cleansing of the Kosovars. But NATO was committed to avoid deploying ground troops in Kosovo, though a secret build-up of NATO troop strength had already begun in Macedonia by mid-March. In Rwanda, the observers and most of the peacekeepers present were withdrawn when the conflict broke out. In Kosovo, the members of the observer team were also withdrawn. In both Rwanda and Kosovo, the international mediators were accused of being too mealy-mouthed and laid back, and of not having been rigorous enough in their demands for proof of concrete action towards peace. For example, in March of 1998, Milosevic was given seven days' notice to halt the violence of his police against the Kosovars and to enter into peace negotiations. He was then given a further ten days, and subsequently an additional grace period of four weeks. On April 29, when an asset freeze (excluding the Russians) was announced, Milosevic was not backed into a corner but rather was given a way out. He used the delays to consolidate his position.

For six months, the United States and Europe rationalized the delays and sent mixed signals about the use of force. Recall that Washington, London, Paris, Belgium, and Bonn had issued travel warnings to its citizens, and asked their nationals to leave the country, six months before the bombing raids actually began.

In both the Rwandan and the Yugoslav cases, aid kept flowing to the offending regimes even as these regimes sought to sabotage efforts to build peace. For example, in September 1998, the United States gave 40 million marks for humanitarian assistance to the Belgrade regime as it was exacerbating the crisis, while Montenegro, Macedonia and Albania, which were buckling un-

der the economic weight of the refugee population, were provided far too little assistance.

In both cases, implementation of any agreement seemed to hinge on the commitment of one man—Slobodan Milosevic in Serbia and Juvénal Habyarimana in Rwanda. And both men seemed always to be saying one thing and doing the opposite. For example, Habyarimana endorsed the Arusha Accords but systematically sabotaged any effort to implement them. Belgrade claimed to have ended its offensive many times while, in fact, it was escalating and intensifying its campaign. At the end of July, Serb forces attacked the KLA in the area of Malishevo and, coincidentally, managed to produce (according to ICRC reports) an exodus of virtually the entire civilian population, including those who had recently arrived from Orahovac which had just been cleansed of its civilian population. As was the Serb general practice, the houses vacated were looted and burned to the ground. On September 29, 1998, Serbian forces pounded mountain villages in southern Kosovo just hours after Belgrade announced it was ending its offensive. On October 10, 1998, the Transnational Foundation—which consistently opposed bombing—claimed that there were 450,000 displaced who had been forced to flee, 150,000 in the open with no access to necessities. Of these, over 100,000 were refugees—30,000 in Albania, 25,000 in Macedonia, 15,000 in Bosnia and the rest elsewhere in Europe. The August 13, 1998, ICRC report stated that the refugee population was then well over 100,000. Forty-five thousand homes had been flattened or made uninhabitable. One thousand, seven hundred Albanians had been arrested. One thousand, three hundred others were "missing." One thousand, four hundred seventy-two fatalities were reported, including 162 women, 143 children, 297 over the age of 55 and 373 unidentified. In addition to these official figures, the existence of mass graves was widely reported. U.S. envoy Richard Holbrooke, on October 13, 1998, announced that he and Milosevic

had agreed on an OSCE international ground verification, and on a NATO (and possibly Russian) air verification of Belgrade's compliance with UN resolutions on Kosovo, and that Milosevic would sign the agreement. But, like Habyarimana, the latter kept finding excuses. At the same time, both Habyarimana and Milosevic presented themselves as middle-of-the-road leaders, the lesser of two evils. Habyarimana had his CDR to the right, while Milosevic had Vojislav Seselj, the leader of the ultra-nationalist Serbian Radical Party (SRS). In the 250 seat Serbian Parliament, the SRS now controls 71 seats, and Seselj is now Deputy Premier. Milosevic's own party, an SPS-Jul coalition, controls only 30 more seats. In fact, Seselj openly stated that Milosevic's agreement with Holbrooke was just a tactical retreat until Milosevic could resume his commitment to the fight against Albanian "terrorists."

But these similarities between the Rwandan and the Kosovan crises are outweighed by the differences between them. The most important of these being that NATO intervened with a bombing campaign against Serbia, while the UN peacekeepers almost entirely withdrew from Rwanda at the equivalent phase of that crisis. In June of 1998, retired Yugoslav General Vuk Obradovic—contradicting the popular view in the West—indicated that if NATO displayed its might, the Yugoslavs could only launch a token resistance. On September 23, 1998, five years after the UN authorized a Chapter VI peacekeeping force (UNAMIR) for Rwanda, with the most restricted of mandates and a paucity of military equipment, the United Nations Security Council—in a 14-0 vote, with only China abstaining—adopted a resolution on Kosovo sanctioning the use of force "as long as regional security is threatened." (Russia supported the motion, but Yevgeny Primakov had not yet been elevated to Prime Minister.) In fact, on October 5, 1998, Russian envoys warned Milosevic that NATO would bomb if Milosevic did not go along with the agreement. While Habyarimana abided by the UN, Serbian President

Slobodan Milosevic taunted the organization and described its threat of force as mere support for terrorists and as a violation of the integrity of Yugoslavia. While Habyarimana insisted upon his support for the agreement as he secretly undermined it, Milosevic repeatedly made his position clear: the Serbs had no intention to back down from a standoff with the West, and would not accept a foreign occupation army in the guise of a peacekeeping force on their soil.

The agreement provided that NATO, through KFOR, would be solely responsible for ensuring compliance. The UN was to play no role. Yugoslav security and military forces were to be totally withdrawn from Kosovo, although 2500 unarmed Minister of Interior forces would remain to be used for civil police functions. In addition, there would be 1,500 Border Guards and 1,000 logistics personnel. Thus, instead of a new integrated army, as provided for in Arusha, provision was made for a disintegrated army—including the KLA, which publicly committed itself to demilitarization.

While Habyarimana had weak control over the media and the levers of economic power, Milosevic had a very firm hand on both. While Habyarimana was known to bend to pressure, Milosevic had a reputation for intransigence in the face of appeals to negotiate or warnings of Serbian economic hardship, isolation or even the horrors of war. Only threats to his power, never incentives, had ever made him change his position. A political opportunist, the principles of truth and compromise never meant anything to him. He began his career in Kosovo by appealing to Serbian nationalism, and in 1991 he channelled Serbian nationalism towards fighting for a greater Serbia; however, under pressure of a countervailing threat to his power base, in 1993 he abandoned the Serbs of Bosnia and Yugoslavia. Milosevic signed Dayton after his army had been weakened by air-strikes. But Kosovo was the spiritual and historical heartland of Serbia. How could the same pattern work in this case?

In Rwanda, the Hutu and Tutsi shared the same culture and religion

and it was difficult to refer to them as different ethnic groups, though the prevalent body type of each group was radically different. In contrast, the Serbs and Kosovars belong to different religions and speak different languages, but look the same. The Hutu and Tutsi lived side by side on the same hills. The Kosovars are said to make up 90 percent of the population of a once-autonomous Kosovo. In Serbia, the Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA) was being decimated. Whereas at the beginning of the summer of 1998, the KLA had controlled 50 percent of the Kosovo region, by the end of the summer their control had withered to 10 percent. In contrast, in Rwanda, the Rwanda Patriotic Front was on the verge of winning the war. The KLA was fighting for a separate Kosovar state. The RPF was fighting for a united Rwanda that treated all its citizens—including Tutsi and Hutu—equally. The KLA consists of rabid ethnic nationalists. The RPF was made up of rabidly Rwandan, rather than Tutsi, nationalists. In Rwanda, the opposition was disciplined and united. In Kosovo in September of 1998, Adem Demaci, the political representative of the KLA, sharply criticized Rugova for supporting the U.S./Kosovo peace plan, which he considered to be too pro-Serb. In fact, the dramatic meeting of Milosevic and Rugova on May 15, 1998, was a product of the diplomacy of the Contact Group. Richard Holbrooke postponed the ban on economic investments and stopped the freeze on Yugoslavian assets that had begun on April 29. Lifting the economic sanctions was the last carrot held out before Milosevic.

While the Rwandese army was ill trained and poorly equipped except for a few elite units, NATO officials believed that they faced an efficient and effective, heavily armed war machine equipped with Mig-29 and Mig-21 fighters. While politicians opposed to both Habyarimana and the RPF were being assassinated in Rwanda, on September 21, 1998, the KLA captured 12 Kosovar politicians involved in supporting the negotiations with Milosevic but treated them well, releasing them unharmed after questioning. Though acts appear-

ing to be genocidal had occurred every time an RPF offensive was launched and an average of 300 people had been victimized in about six separate incidents over a three year period, in Kosovo there was no let up in the ethnic cleansing that the Serbians had launched one full year before the NATO bombing started. Thus, on September 16, Serb forces were reliably reported as burning and looting the mining town of Magura, from which most of the population had been forced to flee. In October of 1998, already 300,000 refugees had been displaced from Kosovo.

Further, there were widespread fears that Montenegro—which, on June 1, 1998, had just elected (with an outright majority) a moderate, Milo Djukanovi, as its President—would be reincorporated into a united Yugoslavia, as Milosevic made moves to take control of the Montenegrin police. In December of 1998, Milosevic blocked Montenegro's plans for economic reform.

The West had tried to be helpful in reaching a settlement in Rwanda, but never applied any significant pressure on Habyarimana. Further, the Western powers all took different positions. In contrast, U.S. National Security Adviser, Sandy Berger; Defense Secretary William Cohen; and General Henry Shelton, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, had all made it crystal clear that if Belgrade did not cease hostilities, withdraw its military forces from Kosovo, and permit those who had been driven from their homes to return, NATO would use its military force against Serbia.

In Rwanda, the government was represented on the Security Council and knew full well that the West was unwilling to get involved. In Rwanda, the media was virtually silent about the genocide that was underway. On March 31, 1998, the United Nations Security Council, by a vote of 14-0 (China abstained), imposed an arms embargo against the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia as an unambiguous message that violence and ethnic cleansing would not be tolerated.⁴ In October of 1998, the North Atlantic Council reported widespread atrocities by Serbian forces

against ethnic Albanian civilians. The flow of refugees out of Kosovo, particularly after the air strikes, occupied headlines in the news.

In the West, media and political pressure in support of intervention in Rwanda was minimal. In the case of Kosovo, media and public pressure for intervention grew; it was NATO leadership that kept delaying and offering Milosevic "just one more chance." For example, on October 28, 1998, NATO forces were said to be waiting for an "activation warning" to prepare to launch air strikes against Serbia.

In Kosovo, two options were held out to the resisting Serbs six months before the threat of force was actually exercised: air strikes or, alternatively, the employment of peacekeepers in considerable strength to supervise a cease-fire. Air strikes were to proceed methodically—a first phase targeting radar sites, using Harm and Alarm anti-radar missiles; a second phase targeting defense sites, military airports, helicopter bases, logistics and ammunition depots; and a third phase targeting army barracks.

In the Balkans, governments forcibly deported their refugee populations to Albania: Montenegro deported 3,000 in September of 1998, after allowing in

75,000 refugees, and Macedonia deported 40,000 in April of 1999. In Zaire, almost a million Rwandese refugees, which included approximately 150,000 genocidists from the Rwandese army and the interahamwe militias, were fed and housed at international expense as, under the umbrella of the Mobutu government of Zaire, they rearmed and prepared their counter-attack against the new RPF government.

Under these circumstances, were the bombings that began on March 27, 1998, the least evil of available options? Or, since they united the Serbs behind Milosevic, causing even the democratic movement to rally behind him, and did nothing to stop the ethnic cleansing, were the bombings not only useless but counterproductive? Would not a further effort at diplomatic negotiations been more effective?

This is not a question easily answered. But assertions about NATO's action being evil and governed by malevolent intent do not help. The evidence suggests that the proper legal requirements had been obtained and the bombing was neither illegal nor immoral. Nor do pat claims that bombing is evil and, in any case, has been a failure. For we are not in a position to judge. Certainly, assertions that NATO caused or trig-

gered the mass outflow of refugees seem erroneous according to the evidence, although the Serbs obviously accelerated the ethnic cleansing once the bombing commenced. Ultimately, however, any judgement about whether or not the bombing was justified must wait until its real effects can be measured. ■

Notes

1. The 1981 census claimed that 77 percent of the 1,584,000 total population was Albanian. The census of 1991, boycotted by the Albanians, claimed 82 percent of a population of 1,965,000 were Albanians. If the Albanians who left since 1975 are counted, perhaps the figure is actually 90 percent. But then the rest of the population is not only Serb; in the 1981 census, 9 percent of the population was said to consist of Montenegrins, Turks, Croats and Romani. Further, that population has been reproducing at three times the rate of the rest of Yugoslavia, and Kosovo, like Rwanda, is one of the most densely populated regions in the world.
2. Will anyone be surprised when Montenegro becomes the last republic to break away from Serbia?
3. Slavko Curuvija, owner of the daily *Dnevni Telegraph* and the weekly *Evropljanin*, and two journalists received five months in prison.
4. But who believed that even clear UN messages would be followed by any enforcement action? □

From Being Uprooted to Surviving: Resettlement of Vietnamese-Chinese "Boat People" in Montreal, 1980–1990

By Lawrence Lam

Toronto: York Lanes Press, 1996; ISBN 1-55014-296-8, 200 pages, indexed; \$18.95

The saga of the "boat people" is a dramatic story, a story of one of the largest refugee movements in recent years. Canada played a significant role in the resettlement of these refugees in bringing them to Canada where they could start anew. *From Being Uprooted to Surviving* by Professor Lam, is based on ethnographic data of a sample of Vietnamese-Chinese accepted for resettlement in Montreal in 1979 and 1980, who were interviewed again in 1984–85 and in 1990–91, this book provides a longitudinal account of their experience of resettlement in Canada. This experience has been marked by successive stages of their struggle to overcome structural barriers and to negotiate a meaningful niche in Canada.

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