

Religious leaders condemn 'ethnic cleansing'

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Serbia," that will encompass lands formerly occupied by non-Serbs.

Many non-Serbs reportedly have been sent packing by foot or motorized transport to find a home of their own; others have been placed in concentration camps or detention centers; and the least fortunate have been massacred in the fighting that has plagued Yugoslavia since it began disintegrating at the beginning of this decade.

"Ethnic cleansing is a euphemism for the systematic terrorizing and displacing of tens of thousands of people," University of Rochester philosophy professor Robert Holmes told the vigil participants.

By referring to non-Serbs as something to be "cleansed," the Serbs are implying that their former fellow citizens are viruses or germs, Holmes said. Even worse than the grisly euphemistic shadow it casts, the phrase "ethnic cleansing" implies the creation of conditions ripe for genocide, he continued.

And although no systematic plan has been uncovered whereby the Serbs plan to wipe out non-Serbs, many observers have labeled the brutal policies of Yugoslavia's troops and Serbian irregulars as tantamount to genocide.

At least one U.S. archbishop has no doubts that the Serbs are playing with genocidal fire in the Balkans. In a phone interview with the *Catholic Courier*, Archbishop Theodore C. McCarrick of Newark, N.J., likened the Serbs' current treatment of non-Serbs to the brutal extermination policies of the Nazi era.

"It seems to me that this whole notion of ethnic cleansing is as close to a notion of genocide as I've seen the world go through since those terrible times," the archbishop said. "It just boggles the mind that this can happen in Europe in the 1990s."

As part of a delegation sent by the U.S. bishops at the invitation of the Croatian bishops' conference, Archbishop McCarrick traveled in Croatia, Bosnia-Herzegovina and Slovenia from July 12-17.

Archbishop McCarrick was joined by several other U.S. Catholic leaders, including Bishop Dale Melczek of Detroit and Father Drew Christiansen, SJ, director of the United States Catholic Conference's Office of International Justice and Peace.

Upon their return from the Balkans, the delegation released several statements through the conference's justice and peace office. Among the conclusions the delegation drew were the fol-



Erik Kunkel/Photo Intern
Robert Lerner (left) lights a candle held by his daughter, Shalina, during an interfaith prayer vigil Aug. 19 at Temple B'rith Kodesh. The service united local Christians, Jews and Muslims in prayer for those suffering in war-torn regions of the former Yugoslavia.

lowing remarks:

- Serbia is waging an aggressive war against civilians, which deserves international condemnation.
- The refugee flow appears to be a conscious war aim of the Serbians.
- Serbia must be forced to cease its policy of "ethnic cleansing."

In a phone interview with the *Courier* from his office in Washington, D.C., Father Christiansen concluded that Serbian military actions were not genocidal as such, but that they had created a refugee flow of tragic proportions.

"It rings of that kind of ethnic hatred that has been genocidal," he said. "(But) I think you can overstate it by saying it's extermination."

James Mesalic, the Republic of Bosnia's Humanitarian Relief Coordinator in the United States, contended that the great lack of information on Serbian treatment of non-Serbs in Serbian-controlled areas leaves open the possibility of mass killings. He noted that "everyone is going to be surprised" if and when Serb-occupied areas are completely open to outside observers.

"It's unbelievable that the international community is letting this go on in this day and age," Mesalic told the *Courier*.

In spite of their clear concern, nearly everyone who spoke to the *Courier* about the situation in the Balkans pulled their punches when asked how the international community should respond.

Military intervention to end the war in the Yugoslav region may create more problems than it solves, according to Jesse Bunch, executive director of

the United States Association for the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. Bunch spoke to the *Courier* by phone from his office in Washington, D.C.

Bunch labeled the refugee crisis created by the Balkans conflict one of the worst since World War II. Nonetheless, he noted that the United Nations is busy with several crises throughout the world right now, ranging from faction-torn Afghanistan to starving Somalia.

"Frankly, the UN is overwhelmed," Bunch said, adding that UN intervention in Serbia would probably mean administering Serbia. "The UN has never disarmed a government, never run a government."

Observers of the war in Yugoslavia argued for measures ranging from tighter economic sanctions on the Serbs to air attacks on strategic sites and even a full-scale invasion of the Yugoslav region.

But the debate over massive military intervention in the Yugoslavian conflict is compounded by counter-accusations that Croatian and Bosnian Muslims have expelled more than 300,000 Serbs from their homes outside Serbia. Such atrocities were detailed by *Newsweek* magazine in its Aug. 3 edition.

And even the U.S. bishops' delegation expressed some doubts about Croatian President Franjo Tudjman's attitudes toward the Bosnians themselves. The delegation did note, however, that Bosnian Muslim refugees have been treated well by the Croats.

The bishops also complained that

"even-handed" condemnations of Croats, Bosnians and Serbs in the Western press obscured the fact that the Serbs are doing the bulk of destructive war making in what was once Yugoslavia.

Meanwhile, as delegations release statements and outsiders conduct casual conversations about torture and murder conducted elsewhere, brutality continues to rage in the Yugoslav regions. And from the victim's perspective, discussion — rather than action — seems always to have been the 20th century response to mass killings.

Alone among all other eras, the 20th century claims the dubious distinction of witnessing the creation of the word "genocide," a word that like the phrase "Never Again," bespeaks this age's particular horrors.

Massive intentional killings of one group of people by another — whether by the direct methods of sword and pillage, or through such less direct methods as starvation and deliberate infection — have marked nearly every century.

African slaves, Irish peasants, Native Americans and Armenian citizens of the Ottoman Empire all suffered under what could be termed genocidal policies. Such policies generally have been instituted by a ruling group over an oppressed minority with an eye to destroying the life, liberty and culture of the minority.

Yet the *New Catholic Encyclopaedia* notes that it took Nazi Germany's grisly policies of mass murder of Jews and others before and during World War II to inspire linguists to coin the word genocide to describe humanity's greatest crime.

Genocide combines the Greek word *genos* (race, nation or tribe) with the Latin suffix *cide* (killing). International lawyers prosecuting Nazis for war crimes in the late 1940s needed the word to describe a crime that, as of that time, had not been affixed to the world's lists of governmental misdeeds.

Nonetheless, because international law did not yet protect people within their own homeland against killing, "crimes against humanity," rather than "genocide" was the ultimate charge laid at the feet of many convicted Nazi criminals. And the Nazis were charged only with crimes committed during the course of the war itself.

In 1946, the United Nations officially outlawed genocide, describing it as (1) killing members of a group; (2) causing serious bodily or mental harm to members of the group; (3) creating conditions designed to physically destroy a group in whole or in part; (4) imposing measures intended to prevent births within the group; (5) forcibly transferring children of the group to another group.

Under such a broad description, several nations could be considered guilty of practicing genocide at one time or another. And, more often than not, mass killings — such as those practiced during the 1970s in Uganda under Idi Amin, or in Kampuchea under Pol Pot — runs relatively unchecked by the international community.

In cases in which slaughter continues unabated, the world community often cites the pragmatic difficulties of stopping mass slaughter: the potential for intervention backfiring, the delicacies of violating national boundaries, the futility of interfering in age-old feuds between different peoples.

Such arguments are currently vying with more impassioned pleas by Bosnian Muslims and others to the world to halt Serbia's "ethnic cleansing."

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