

Expert: Bosnia may bury U.N.

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democracy, Sacirbey claimed. He noted that the Bosnian government comprises Orthodox Serbs, Catholic Croats and Bosnian Muslims and that 15 percent of Bosnian defense forces are Serbs and 20 percent are Croats.

"This is not a civil war," he argued. "If you look at the history of Bosnia-Herzegovina, you will find it is not a region of age-old ethnic hatred, but a region of age-old ethnic co-existence."

To further make his point, Sacirbey pointed out that hundreds of towns in Bosnia contain mosques, Jewish temples, and Catholic and Orthodox churches. Other ethnic groups, including Hungarians, Albanians and Macedonians, also live in the republic along with Croats, Serbs and Muslims, he said.

Sacirbey criticized the continuing arms embargo against the former Yugoslavia, noting that it only hurts the Bosnians instead of their well-armed opponents, the Serbs and Croats.

"I think it is shameful that the international community maintains this embargo and denies the inherent right of my country to defend its citizens," he said. "We don't want American troops, we don't want German troops ... We simply want the right to defend our country, to defend pluralism, to defend democracy."

Sacirbey's outlook on his nation's plight echoes and also contradicts statements made by other observers of the war in the former Yugoslavia.

Interestingly, a famed human rights activist — who is also a well-known Serb — would find no argument with Sacirbey's contention that Serbia must be defeated militarily because it is a fascist state bent on conquest.

Srdja Popovic, who emigrated to the United States in 1991, particularly criticized Serbia's President Slobodan Milosevic as a power-hungry dictator who merely wants to control Serbian military forces for his own ends.

"His basic strategy is to do what he likes until he meets real resistance," Popovic said of Milosevic in an Aug. 26 interview with *The Christian Science Monitor*.

"Then he pulls back and tries to make everyone believe he has come around," Popovic continued. "Then he goes on. The international community is slow to catch up with these tactics ... He knows the French, the British don't want to do anything. So he backs off. Then they say, 'Wait, let's give Milosevic a chance.' Soon the momentum is lost. Where are your air strikes?"

Popovic also predicted that even the humbling of Bosnia will not end the brutal war. He predicted further conflict between Croatia and Serbia, and said that two other former Yugoslav regions — Kosova and Macedonia — are "in trouble."

Regardless of the war's political outcome, the region's pluralistic religious nature has been altered considerably, according to several reports by Catholic News Service.

A member of the U.S. bishops' International Policy Committee recently condemned atrocities attributed to Croat and Bosnian forces in the Balkan war.

In letters to the Croat ambassador to the United States and the Bosnian ambassador to the United Nations, Archbishop Theodore E. McCarrick of Newark, N.J., said no "burden of suffering" experienced by

their respective peoples justifies "serious human rights abuses" by their military.

To Bosnian Ambassador Mohammad Sacirbey — Omar's brother — the archbishop said he acknowledged that fighting between Croat and Muslim forces and accompanying rights abuses "can be understood in the wider context of internal and external aggression, and the inadequate response of the international community."

But there is no moral excuse for "attacks on and forcible displacement of civilian populations, blockading aid convoys, rape and other human rights abuses," he said.

"We have condemned Serb aggression and 'ethnic cleansing' against Croats by Serbs and Muslims," Archbishop McCarrick reminded Croatian Ambassador Petar Sarcevic in an Aug. 19 message.

"We understand the impact of the massive refugee flows and the general chaos that this savage war has unleashed," he said. "But no burden of suffering justifies 'ethnic cleansing' of Muslims or Serbs; rape; the denial of food, water and medicine to civilians; or other crimes being committed by Croat forces."

More than half of the Catholics in Bosnia-Herzegovina have been forced from their homes by the war, according to the country's three bishops. Serbs or Muslims have taken over or destroyed more than half of the Catholic parishes, they added.

The bishops listed the destruction in a statement issued after an early August meeting, Vatican Radio reported.

The Aug. 9 Vatican Radio report said the bishops called for an end to "ethnic cleansing" and the freeing from concentration camps of prisoners of war and civilians. They also asked that people who fled their home areas be allowed to return.

Meanwhile, the war in Bosnia-Herzegovina has shown the "anti-Islamic prejudice" of Europe and Christianity, said Mustafa Ceric, Bosnian Muslim religious leader.

"The liberal and tolerant Europe died here in Bosnia. Reborn is the medieval Europe, the Europe of anti-Islamic crusades," he said in an Aug. 18 interview with *Avvenire*, a Milan-based Catholic newspaper.

"We are suspected of fundamentalism and intolerance as if we should always excuse ourselves for belonging to Islam," he said.

Ceric was interviewed in Sarajevo and identified as the main Islamic religious leader in Bosnia. He said Muslim casualties include 250,000 dead, 30,000 women raped and 800 mosques destroyed.

And finally, a university professor bemoaned rising Muslim-Catholic hostility during a visit to his home in the border town of Gornji Vakuf, Bosnia-Herzegovina.

The professor, Rade Kvesic, said equal numbers of Catholics and Muslims had cohabited peacefully in the area. However, he said, Muslims had launched a "constant series of attacks" in January after the U.N.-backed Vance-Owen peace plan awarded the town to the Bosnian Croats.

"Before politicians began to spread hatred, there was no intolerance in the Muslim nation," said Kvesic. "But young Muslims who had studied in Islamic countries brought back a militant form of Islam, very different than the tolerant form existing for centuries in Bosnia."

"Five centuries after Turkish rule began here, Muslims are again singing songs full of hatred for Catholics," Kvesic said. "I recall with great pain my friend the imam of Gornji Vakuf, who was always an example of tolerance. His house is only 50 meters from mine, but now I can no longer visit him — even though I would once have sooner borrowed flour from him than from my own Catholic neighbors."

This story contains information from Catholic News Service reports.



S. John Wilkin/Staff photographer
Nina Shavron, a native of Tuzla, sits with photographs and correspondences she has received from relatives she is trying to help flee from Bosnia-Herzegovina.

Native longs to help Muslim cousins flee

IRONDEQUOIT — Hilton High School's student body was short at least two pupils when classes started this week.

But don't expect school officials to go looking for them.

Amra Ibrsimovic, 18, and Amela Spahic, 19, would like to leave their hometown of Tuzla, Bosnia-Herzegovina, to continue the school work they started at Hilton.

First they would have to travel to Sarajevo, or to Zagreb, Croatia, to obtain the visas necessary to leave their country.

Unfortunately, they can't go anywhere, because surrounding Serb forces won't let them leave on the roads out of their beautiful city of more than 800,000 people.

Life was not nearly so difficult for another 18-year-old Bosnian in 1969. Along with her mother and sister, she emigrated from Tuzla in what was then Yugoslavia, dreaming of a better life in the United States.

Now, Nina Shavron, a parishioner at St. Ambrose Church, 25 Empire Blvd., would probably give anything to travel freely back to her hometown and rescue her Muslim cousins away from war-torn Bosnia.

"I think being away from there and getting an education would be a way of healing their wounds," Shavron said as she sat in her Irondequoit home describing her efforts to get the two girls — and other relatives — out of the Balkans.

"It takes months to connect with them," she said of her relatives. "The letters we've gotten are basically to let us know they're surviving."

She agonizes about sitting in her comfortable living room watching news reports that try to explain the madness that has overtaken a land where she once enjoyed dancing to folk music, flirting with boys, singing with her family and visiting friends all over the region.

She labels the war an idea of greedy Serb — and to a lesser extent, Croat — leaders, and she disbelieves any arguments that it is a religious war between Muslims, Catholics and Orthodox. Counting a Palestinian Jew among her many friends, her late Muslim father and her Catholic mother always taught her to respect and cherish her own faith and that of others.

"I grew up not knowing any hatred," she said. "My mom's best friend was a Serb."

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