THE WARPATH The New Republic MAY 18, 1998

The New Republic

MAY 18, 1998

SECTION: Pg. 16

LENGTH: 1720 words

HEADLINE: THE WARPATH

BYLINE: Theresa Agovino

HIGHLIGHT:
Kosovo Dispatch

BODY:
qirez, yugoslavia

The Albanian flag--a double-headed black eagle on a red background-- stretched behind a framed photo of two men shot dead by Serbian police in March. Zeqir Rexhepi stood beside the memorial to his brother and uncle, greeting an endless stream of mourners who had traveled via tractor over windswept mountains to pay their respects. Rexhepi couldn't always play the host, though. He had condolence calls to make. Twenty-five people were killed in the village of Qirez and neighboring Likoshan as police attempted to eradicate the Kosovo Liberation Army, an armed rebel group demanding independence for the Serbian province where ethnic Albanians make up 90 percent of the population.

When Rexhepi returned to Kosovo last year after 13 years as a political exile in Germany, he didn't expect to endure a twelve-hour assault by police using helicopters, cannons, armored vehicles, and a multitude of guns. After all, more respect for human rights in the Balkans was one of the goals of the Dayton Peace Accord that ended the Bosnian crisis in 1995. Any new violations were supposed to bring sanctions down upon the Belgrade regime headed by President Slobodan Milosevic. "The Dayton agreement was supposed to improve the situation here. Milosevic signed it. The West backed it. I believed in it, " said Rexhepi. "I thought the situation would calm down."

But Rexhepi was wrong. The international community was so intent on preserving Dayton--and keeping the Bosnian crisis from flaring up again--that it never pushed Milosevic hard on Kosovo. The international community actually began lifting sanctions against Yugoslavia more than a year ago, even as the number of deaths from Serb-Albanian clashes in Kosovo tripled. As a result, the plight of Rexhepi's fellow Albanians--who have lived in apartheid-like conditions in Kosovo since Milosevic stripped the province of its autonomy in 1989--has continued to worsen.

Over the last two months, police have killed more than 100 Albanians, practically all of them civilians, in a quest to extinguish the KLA. Serbian police still surround the region where the massacres occurred. They won't let most aid convoys through, and they've been known to use some of the starving Albanians for target practice.

Milosevic, for his part, has resisted outside efforts to bring the fighting to a stop. Last week, he held a referendum on the question of whether international mediators should be allowed into Kosovo. Not surprisingly, the voters--all Serbs due to an Albanian boycott--said no. Meanwhile, the international community continues to dither about how to react, much as it did in the early stages of the conflict in Bosnia.

Of course, the Kosovo crisis is, in many ways, even more complicated than the one in Bosnia. Whereas that war always had a certain manufactured quality- -the Serb push to conquer and "cleanse" Muslim-majority land was largely engineered by Milosevic--the ethnic quarrel in Kosovo has deep and genuine roots. The tiny Serb minority views the province, scene of an ancient Serb military defeat at the hands of the Turks, as the cradle of the Serbian nation. Albanians, for their part, harbor legitimate grievances about the systematic discrimination they have suffered at Serb hands. While some kind of conflict here was perhaps inevitable, the current state of despair is also the product of diplomatic miscues by outside powers. "It amazes me that we find ourselves behind the eight ball in the Balkans yet again," said Kurt Bassuener, a policy analyst at the Balkan Institute in Washington. "No one had given any thought to what would happen if there was a crackdown on the Albanians."

Indeed, for years, the West's chief worry was that Kosovo, the perennial Balkan tinderbox, would be the source of an Albanian revolt that could spill into neighboring Macedonia (which is also home to a large and disgruntled ethnic Albanian population) as well as Albania, Bulgaria, Greece, and Turkey. This fear led Western diplomats to embrace the ostensible leader of Kosovo's Albanians, "shadow president" Ibrahim Rugova, whose passive, nonviolent approach to dealing with Serb abuses promised, or seemed to promise, a path to self-government that would avoid bloodshed.

It was a plausible enough strategy. Elected in 1992, Rugova fancies himself an Albanian version of Gandhi. When Rugova kept Kosovo from being caught up in the Bosnian violence--a legitimate and worthy accomplishment--Western leaders rewarded him by treating him as if he were a genuine head of state. Rugova met with top brass in many Western countries, and received all the courtesies extended visiting dignitaries, despite representing an outlawed government. Rugova even had an audience with U.S. Secretary of State Madeleine Albright.

Rugova was also a source of frustration to the West, however. The international community supported self-government in Kosovo, but Rugova kept making loud calls for independence, fueling aspirations he was in no position to fulfill. Having fed the mystique surrounding him, the West could no longer control him. He rebuffed international advisers who encouraged him to end the Albanian boycott of Yugoslav elections, to hold more demonstrations, and to expand discussion of possible solutions to the problem to include options other than independence. Said one Western diplomat, "He became another paranoid Balkan leader who thought critics were trying to take his job."

At the same time, the Albanians themselves were becoming disenchanted with the lack of progress under Rugova. Eventually, the United States began courting other Albanian politicians who would be more effective spokesmen for a peaceful transition to self-government. But such efforts came too late. The KLA appeared on the scene in 1996, and the Kosovo Albanians--who believed that violence had brought attention and independence in Bosnia--were quick to support it. "The KLA is a predictable guerrilla movement that grew out of Rugova's ineffective leadership," said Dukagjin Gorani, political editor of Koha Ditore, an Albanian newspaper in

Kosovo. "From a moral standpoint, it is hard for Albanians to criticize the KLA. The KLA brought CNN and the diplomats here."

For the international community, the KLA poses a dilemma. The KLA has attacked police stations and, more recently, assassinated police officers; this, in turn, prompted the police to stage a horrific raid on four villages in the Drenica region of Kosovo. Diplomats don't want to countenance KLA terrorism, but they don't want to encourage Milosevic's draconian crackdown, either. Some observers believe that, when U.S. special envoy to the Balkans Robert Gelbard called the KLA a terrorist organization, Milosevic may have misinterpreted the remark as a green light to go after the group. "It was a mistake on Gelbard's part," said Janusz Bugajski, a director at the Center for Strategic and International Studies. "You don't want to say anything that lets Milosevic think he has free rein in Kosovo."

Meanwhile, Western diplomats concede they remain perplexed by what Milosevic is really up to. On the one hand, Milosevic has named a special envoy from the Yugoslav federal government to participate in negotiations with Albanians, rather than simply dispatching a Serbian official--as he had initially suggested he would do. This would seem to signal a more tolerant attitude toward the Albanians in Kosovo. But Milosevic also just added an ultra-nationalist, Vojislav Seslj, to his government. And while Milosevic has agreed, in principle, to an education accord that would allow Albanian students to resume classes in the state-run university's buildings, he still refuses to allow an international third party to mediate talks with the Albanians.

As one diplomat admits, "We don't know what he is doing. He could be just stringing us along, or he could be preparing to enter a dialogue." Yet the international community seems to be giving Milosevic the benefit of the doubt. At the end of March, the Contact Group--the six nations that oversee the Balkan peace process--opted to delay imposing new threatened sanctions against Yugoslavia. They did so despite the fact that Yugoslavia failed to meet the Contact Group's demand to remove the military forces from Drenica. And they did so despite the deaths of at least two Albanians and attacks on four villages that sent people fleeing from their homes on the day before the Contact Group met. The Contact Group's only "action" was to issue yet another warning to Milosevic: If he does not begin serious discussions with Albanians regarding self-rule in the next month, the group may go back to sanctions.

It's not hard to see shades of Bosnia in the Kosovo conflict and the reaction to it. In both cases, the United States wanted to impose sanctions immediately. In both cases, Russia, a traditional ally of the Serbs and Yugoslavia's chief weapons supplier, argued against the sanctions, while the Europeans largely favored giving Milosevic more time to make slow progress toward compliance. While diplomats have responded more quickly to the violence in Kosovo than they did to the early stages of the disaster in Bosnia, the cracks in the Contact Group have, if anything, appeared more swiftly this time than they did the last. The real tragedy of the bloodshed in Drenica may be that it has taught Milosevic just how much he can get away with in Kosovo. One hundred dead Albanians attract the world's attention. But a few half-hearted moves toward compromise can postpone sanctions.

Diplomats insist the latest set of sanctions--which include freezing Yugoslavia's assets abroad, halting foreign investment in Serbia and Montenegro, and ending export credits to Belgrade--would finally push Milosevic over the edge. That's doubtful, since Milosevic has survived sanctions for over six years. But Western

governments will never know if they don't implement them. They'd also better hope they work, and work quickly. Otherwise, the world will have to brace itself to deal with a polarized situation controlled by KLA assassins on one extreme and Milosevic's brutal security forces on the other.

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LOAD-DATE: May 14, 1998