

CONFLICT IN THE BALKANS: IN ENEMY HANDS - A Special Report; Clearer Picture of Bosnia Camps: A Brutal Piece of a Larger Plan

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ZAGREB, Croatia, Aug. 15— The first images of emaciated men peering through barbed wire in Serbian detention centers in Bosnia and Herzegovina riveted the world's attention. In the week since, a clearer picture has begun to emerge of the scope of the camps, their conditions and the role they play in the larger Serbian military strategy.

Interviews with officials of international relief agencies and dozens of Bosnians -- some of them still held in the camps, others living as refugees in Croatia -- establish these major points about a conflict that has created Europe's worst refugee crisis since the end of World War II:

*Conditions at the detention camps were described as brutal, but there is little evidence as yet that the Serbs were using them to carry out a policy of mass killing. Witnesses said repeatedly that death was usually more of a random event, resulting from beatings by drunken guards, disease and revenge shootings by Serbian irregulars whose friends had died in combat elsewhere.

*The camps were only one of the instruments of terror in the arsenal of "ethnic cleansing," the campaign to drive Muslims and Croats from their homes in large swaths of Bosnia and Herzegovina.

*The Serbian efforts gathered momentum in mid-May, after Western aid workers and journalists were temporarily driven out of most of Bosnia by a series of lethal, premeditated attacks. The "ethnic cleansing" operations were largely complete by early July, when Western aid workers returned to the area.
Assertions of Genocide

*The existence of the detention centers, and the possibility that summary executions were taking place within them, were made known to Western governments and aid agencies at least a month before the first extensive press report on the subject appeared in *Newsday* on Aug. 2. It was only after that report, and the first broadcast of film from the camps four days later, that President Bush announced that he had ordered American intelligence to use "every asset available" to investigate the conditions at the camps.

The interviews have shed little light on the assertions of the combatants

themselves, which are wildly divergent. The Serbian forces that control 70 percent of the country say, for example, that they are holding no more than 8,000 prisoners in a handful of camps, but their beleaguered Bosnian Government foes say the number is 105,000 people in 94 locations. Bosnia estimates that 17,000 have died in the camps, but refugee interviews can account for only a few hundred such deaths.

Though the investigation did not substantiate assertions that the camps had once again brought genocide to the heart of Europe, it has turned up ample evidence of mistreatment, beatings and abuse involving thousands of prisoners. Some have spoken of dozens of inmates being taken away, never to be seen again, and others have told of an incident in which more than 100 prisoners were machine-gunned when they rioted for lack of water.

Those accounts cannot be directly confirmed. But their credibility is bolstered by the consistency of testimony from refugees and prisoners in disparate places who have had no chance to coordinate their stories.

More damaging evidence may still be hidden, for even as they let Western reporters into the region to visit the camps, Serbian officials were shuttling prisoners out of sight and dismantling the most notorious camps.

[...]

Bosnia and Herzegovina was the most ethnically mixed of the six republics that made up Yugoslavia after World War II. Muslims, Slavs whose forebears converted to Islam during the centuries in which Bosnia was ruled by the Ottoman Turks, were the most numerous group in Bosnia and Herzegovina, with 44 percent of the population of 4.5 million, as measured in the 1991 census.

Serbs, an Orthodox Christian Slavic group that predominates in the neighboring Serbian republic, were 31 percent of the Bosnian total. Croats, who like the others are Slavs and speak Serbo-Croatian but are Roman Catholics, are 17 percent of the population.

The remainder identified themselves to the census-takers as Yugoslavs, embracing a non-ethnic nationalism that today is all but crushed.

Those groups were interspersed throughout Bosnia, with many towns and villages having no majority ethnic group and many Muslims, Serbs and Croats living next door to each other. Mixed marriages among all three ethnic groups were commonplace.

Slovenia and Croatia declared independence from Yugoslavia in 1991, but the Bosnian leadership was leery of following suit, having watched neighboring Croatia plunged almost immediately into vicious fighting with the Serb-dominated Yugoslav armed forces. But the Sarajevo leadership scheduled a

referendum on independence for Feb. 29 of this year. The Muslims and Croats voted yes, while Serbs boycotted and insisted on dividing the country into three ethnic cantons.

The Bosnian Government refused to accept cantonnement of the country, and war erupted in early April, after the European Community officially granted recognition. The Yugoslav Army and Serbian irregulars quickly overwhelmed the lightly armed defenders.

The plan, it is evident now, was to seize enough territory to forge links between the Serbs in Bosnia, the Serbs in Serbia, and the Serbs in neighboring Croatia. As many as half of Bosnia's two million Muslims live in the areas picked to be corridors between the various Serbian regions. The Muslims were to be exiled forever in the policy the Serbs call ethnic cleansing.

[...]

In village after village, it begins with local Serbs demanding that their Muslim or Croat neighbors hand over their weapons. That is generally followed by the cutoff of electricity and water and an ultimatum. Shortly after, Serbian soldiers backed by armor roll through the town, shooting a few people, dynamiting houses and mosques and driving men, women and children first into fields and then into camps.

The detention centers play a major role in the Serbian strategy. The intention, it seems, is that a few days' or weeks' incarceration in grim conditions will overcome the civilians' reluctance to give up their property and flee their ancestral homes forever. Indeed, thousands of Muslims have signed documents "voluntarily" relinquishing all their goods and property in exchange for their release from the camps.

[...]

The Bosnian Government said that on July 19, the Bosnian President, Alija Izetbegovic, wrote to President Bush complaining of "genocide" in the violent attempt to redraw the map of his country. Yet it was only when the story appeared in the press two weeks later that Mr. Bush publicly directed American spy agencies to train their full resources on the question of whether there were concentration camps in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

"If you ask me," Mr. Izetbegovic said last week, "it was a question of naivete on the part of the West. They simply could not believe such things are happening in our country, in Europe, in the last 10 years of the 20th century."

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