

Article by the High Representative, Wolfgang Petritsch: "Yes, Multiethnic Bosnia"

SARAJEVO, Bosnia "Something strange is going on," Thomas L. Friedman wrote on the situation in the Balkans (IHT Opinion, Jan. 24). I could not agree more. By advocating "soft partition" of Bosnia-Herzegovina, he and others suggest that the nationalists who threw the Balkans into a brutal war that killed 200,000 people and displaced more than half of the population should now be waving victory flags.

Mr. Friedman suggests "letting the Serbian sector fall under Serbia and the Croatian sector under Croatia and leaving the rump Muslim sector as an independent ministate." But there is no such thing as a Serbian or Croatian sector in Bosnia. Ethnic cleansing has taken its toll, but Serbs, Croats and Bosniacs still live intermingled.

Who will draw the line? Where would the 30,000 Serbs and 20,000 Croats who live in Sarajevo go?

Who can believe that the Bosniacs would give up their claim on places from which they were brutally driven out, such as Srebrenica, Foca and Visegrad? They would live squeezed in a mini-state contemplating revenge. We would have created a Gaza strip in the middle of Europe.

This pattern is reflected in the entire region. Partition in Macedonia or Kosovo would produce a new state with varied cultural and ethnic identities. The result of any attempt at partition would be further bloodshed.

The international community has committed itself to securing the rights of the victims of ethnic cleansing, after neglecting them for too long - the right to recover the property stolen from them, the right to return to their homes, the right to see the perpetrators of the war prosecuted.

A multiethnic Bosnia is therefore not an illusion designed by ambitious do-gooders. It is the answer to the war.

Rebuilding a war-torn country and ending a war are about more than peace secured by troops. It means establishing functioning political institutions, it means economic reform, it means civil peace. We have come a long way down this road.

Refugees return to areas that saw the worst atrocities in the war. They claim their property and recover it. Only recently, Human Rights Watch called this development a "breakthrough" in the postwar development of this country.

So the real project for Bosnia is to integrate, not to separate. The concept of ethnic exclusiveness would lead straight to an atomizing of the Balkans, ripping away any political or economic stability.

The writer is the high representative of the international community for Bosnia-Herzegovina. He contributed this comment to the International Herald Tribune.

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