Article by the High Representative, Carlos Westendorp:”Lessons Bosnia Taught Us”

Bosnia is back in the public eye. I have been besieged by international journalists and Western governments alike, all seeking answers basically to two questions: What has the international community gleaned from its experience here? And how can that experience be applied to Kosovo?

The first point to make is that while the similarities between Bosnia and Kosovo are obvious – the same horrendous methods of ethnic cleansing, the same man behind it all – Kosovo is no Bosnia.

The differences are important. The first is that in Bosnia, the international community took a lot longer to intervene. When it did so, however, air strikes were backed up by ground troops which went in as peacekeepers. When it converted United Nations blue berets into an intervention force, international troops had support from interested parties on the ground. The decisive factor in 1995, in fact, was the reinvigorated Muslim and Croat armies, who, had they not been prevented by the Allies, would certainly have driven the Serbs from the richest, western part of what is now Republika Srpska, or the ethnic Serb half of Bosnia.

The second is that, in order to stop the war, the West integrated Yugoslav President Slobodan Milosevic into the search for a settlement, as if he had been a part of the solution and not, as we now know, part of the problem. A golden opportunity to create a lasting solution for the Balkans was thus missed.

The Big Mistake

The main tactical mistake the allies made was not, as has been suggested, the failure to introduce ground troops from the outset. The present humanitarian disaster in Kosovo, set in motion by Milosevic last winter, was always going to escalate in the Spring. Even if the allies had had the necessary political backing, the military command never had enough time to prepare. The big mistake was to discard this option publicly, which led Milosevic to believe that he had a free hand in Kosovo, and that time was on his side.

There's no use, of course, crying over spilled milk. Ground-force intervention is going to be necessary, with or without Milosevic's agreement. We should proceed with the preparation of the necessary troops as fast as possible – though with certain conditions.

First, however many non-Nato troops the force contains (and I think there should be a significant contingent), it must be Nato-led, even though it should preferably have UN Security Council backing. Second, the territory should be fully demilitarized, with all military and paramilitary forces removed. This means that the KLA should be disarmed. We should not be tempted into supporting or even relying upon the KLA: This would be to create a Frankenstein's monster, impossible to tame later on. And third, the 32,000 troops of the Nato-led Stabilization Force in Bosnia (SFOR) should have no role in Kosovo. This would send a dangerous message to the Serbs of Bosnia. We must keep Bosnia out of the conflict.

Would peace be possible if we negotiated with Milosevic again? Certainly – but it would just as certainly be a short peace. One does not enlist a pyromaniac into the fire brigade. It may appear that realpolitik requires that the international community deal with Belgrade, but that would be short-term vision. Milosevic will not be able to afford the reconstruction of his bombed country without international

help. That help – indeed, the entire agreement that would halt the bombing – must be made conditional on a clear commitment from Belgrade to fully democratize Yugoslavia. This process must be firmly anchored to a closely monitored timetable, and will eventually lead (the sooner the better) to Milosevic's definitive exit from the stage.

In view of the Bosnian experience, what should become of Kosovo after the bombing? We should certainly not advocate independence, which would be tantamount to partitioning a country along ethnic lines. This is exactly what we're fighting against. Tampering with frontiers in order to make them correspond to ethnic majorities inhabiting the Balkans – the establishment of a Greater Serbia, a Greater Albania, and so on – was and remains Milosevic's Grand Design. It is also a recipe for further war.

The only possible solution for Kosovo, once those ethnically-cleansed have been returned to their homes, is the eventual establishment of an autonomous state within Serbia (or Yugoslavia). Autonomy is a necessary condition for a lasting peace, though it cannot bring peace on its own. There is a paradox here: It is both too late and too soon for an autonomous Kosovo. Too late because, after this Spring's ethnic cleansing, it will be years before Serbs and Kosovar Albanians will wish to live together again; and too soon because there is still no real democracy in the region.

Therefore, a full international protectorate is required. It may last for a few years. Yes, this disregards the principles of sovereignty, but so what? This is not the moment for post-colonial sensitivity. Besides, there is no other way of guaranteeing the security of the people who live in Kosovo, be they Serbs or Albanians.

The protectorate needs to be a flexible civilian organisation, with command over all military and civilian aspects of administration, including the police and judiciary. It should

be jointly led by the EU and U.S., in strong trans-Atlantic partnership, but with one head. The creation of a High Representative for Bosnia has been one of the most successful devices the international community has come up with to make this trans-Atlantic partnership work. In this agency, the EU, U.S. and others work together under one umbrella – they do not compete with each other as they do elsewhere in the world.

As in Bosnia, a fissiparous bureaucracy will grow up in Kosovo. This is fine: Different agencies can bring Balkan expertise to the region. But it must be made clear from the outset that the head of the Kosovo organization rests at the top of the pyramid of power; he or she cannot be a first among equals, which in the Bosnian experience with rival agencies and too many special envoys has led to energy-sapping infighting.

With a protectorate in place in Kosovo, the time would be right for an international conference, based on Germany's ideas for a "stability pact". Lasting peace in the Balkans is only possible if we tackle the problem regionally. Our approach thus far has been ad-hoc.

Respect for Democracy

The problems of the region will only be solved when we have introduced a general respect for democracy and the rule of law. But, then again, how can we hope for minority rights to be respected when the rights of the majority are disregarded ? These ideas are finally gaining credibility.

The Balkans will require a great deal of money. It is not an exaggeration to talk of a second Marshall Plan. Civil peace implementation costs at least as much as military engagement, and probably more. The World Bank's estimated cost for the reconstruction of Bosnia was about US$23 billion. Yet at Dayton, the world pledged only US$5.1 billion, or about two-and-a- half times the cost of a Stealth Bomber.

Both moral and material reconstruction will be required after this crisis. The “Balkan curse” need not last forever. As in Western Europe, chronic infighting can and will be resolved by integration into the European institutions. After Kosovo we will have a chance, perhaps a unique chance, to bring peace to this troubled region.

Mr Westendorp, a former Spanish minister of foreign affairs, is the High Representative of the International Community for the civil implementation of the Dayton Peace Accords.