



BALKAN WATCH

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A Review of Current Events

KOSUMI SETS JUNE GOAL FOR INDEPENDENCE. Kosovo Prime Minister Bajram Kosumi has set June 2006 as his goal for an independent Kosovo in an interview with the daily Tema newspaper. Kosumi and his Serbian counterparts are awaiting the beginning of Kosovo final status talks which have tentatively been scheduled to begin in Vienna on January 25. He advocated creating a "civic state" instead of an "ethnic state," allowing minority Kosovo Serbs a stronger basis to participate in government and integrate within Kosovo's civil society. He noted that different groups could live together within one state so long as freedoms are provided and protected for everyone. He had asserted in another interview earlier this month that Kosovo Albanian officials would not deal directly with Serbian officials during the talks. UN envoy to the talks, former Finnish President Martti Ahtisaari, is overseeing the final status negotiations. While the international community awaits the talks, minority Albanians in southern Serbia, just across the border with Kosovo, have stepped up demands for increased autonomy. Albanian representatives from the towns of Presavo, Bujanovac, and Medvedia have asked that their respective towns be allowed to unite with Kosovo in case it is granted independence during the status talks. Serbian President Boris Tadic rejected this demand after visiting the region recently. Some international observers fear that renewed fighting could break out near these towns. Meanwhile, Macedonian President Branko Crvenkovski has encouraged the international community to be cautious in its view of the conflicts in the Balkans. He warned that the dispute in Kosovo may be more complicated than it appears, stating that the international community has often underestimated the potential violence that could emerge in the region. After meeting with Montenegrin President Filip Vujanovic, Crvenkovski offered to help as much as he could in reaching a settlement in Kosovo that would promote peace.

ROMA FAMILIES REFUSE MOVE. A group of approximately 125 Roma families in northern Kosovo near the town of Mitrovica have refused to move from their lead-contaminated camp, despite pleas from UN representatives, who suggested they could move to a former French military base nearby. Officials from the World Health Organization have warned that the families could be in serious danger from continued exposure to the lead. The families, for the most part, have lived in the camp for the past six years. One Kosovo Roma representative claimed that the move from the current camp to the nearby military base was so insignificant that it would not matter there; he stated that the conditions at the base were unlikely to be much better. The representative noted that some of the children were very ill due to lead contamination. UNMIK has been under significant criticism for its failure to adequately handle the Roma crisis

in Kosovo.

COUNCIL OF EUROPE DEMANDS ACCESS TO DETENTION FACILITY.

Officials from the Council of Europe have asked NATO to allow its Committee on the Prevention of Torture to access the Camp Bondsteel facility in Kosovo so that it can evaluate the human rights situation there. NATO officials, however, have stated that no detainees have been held at the facility since 2004. Despite these calls, many in Europe fear that the CIA might be using the facility to hold illegal combatants amid controversy that has erupted over the past few months about potential CIA prisons in Eastern Europe. Council of Europe officials have stated that their ability to tour Camp Bondsteel could help reduce some of these fears and prove that NATO and the U.S. are not using the facility inappropriately. A NATO spokesman also noted that when the camp did host detainees, all of them had access to Red Cross officials, who were able to inform their families about their safety. Likewise, the Council has access to all prison facilities operated by the UN in Kosovo. The Council of Europe, based in Strasbourg, has been attempting to obtain access to the facility for eighteen months.

KOSOVO PRIVATIZATION DEADLINES EXTENDED.

Officials from the Kosovo Trust Agency have extended the deadline for the privatization of Kosovo's largest hotel and a brewery. Agency officials noted that their decision to extend the deadline was prompted by various interested companies asking for more time to research the potential consequences of purchasing the facilities. The privatization process is one component of the various international standards that Kosovo is expected to implement as a precondition for potential independence. Various officials in Kosovo, however, have stated that the former Serb province's unsettled political status has hindered prospective buyers, uncertain whether their investments would be safe in any prospective political status outcome.

MONTENEGRIN OFFICIALS EXPECT REFERENDUM DISCUSSIONS SOON.

Montenegrin Prime Minister Milo Djukanovic told reporters that he expects EU-mediated talks between the Montenegrin government and opposition over the rules for an upcoming independence referendum to begin soon. Djukanovic was optimistic that the talks could reach agreement quickly, stating that he believed they could be reached during the course of one day. Last month, the EU appointed Slovak diplomat Miroslav Lajcak to mediate between the parties to prepare for the referendum. Djukanovic's government has tentatively set the referendum for April; however, pro-Serbian leaders in the republic have balked at the process, and instead are seeking to maintain the current *status quo* state union treaty between Serbia and Montenegro.

Montenegrin officials have claimed that Serbia has been holding it back from progressing toward its goal of EU accession because of Belgrade's limited cooperation with the UN war crimes tribunal at The Hague. Chief prosecutor Carla Del Ponte has put pressure on Belgrade to improve its cooperation. Recently, UN officials have asked Belgrade to provide it with indicted war criminal Ratko Mladic's health records. Rasim Ljajic, Serbian official responsible for relations with The Hague, claimed that Belgrade would "no doubt" provide the records to the tribunal.

PEACEKEEPERS ACCUSED IN BOSNIAN KILLING.

Bosnian Serb Interior Minister Darko Matijasevic suggested that EU peacekeepers who reportedly accidentally killed a woman in the attempted arrest of a war crimes suspect should be charged and held responsible for their actions. Twelve-year-old Dragoljub Abazovic, additionally, was injured in the attempted arrest. His father, Dragomir Abazovic, has been wanted by the international community for committing atrocities in the town of Rogatica during the 1992-1995 Bosnian war. EU peacekeepers stated that the Abazovic family began opening fire on them as they approached to take Dragomir into custody. They returned fire, wounding the son and killing his mother. Dragomir Abazovic also sustained serious injuries to his head during the arrest. EUFOR peacekeepers took over from NATO forces last year in Bosnia and number approximately 6,300 troops.

QUOTABLE QUOTES:

"We are not caravan Gypsies to be shuttled from camp to camp. We want to live like all decent people and be allowed back to our homes."—Kosovo Roma Representative Skender Gushani, expressing his group's dismay with their plight as displaced persons (*AP*, 1/9/06).

"There are always stages in the creation of a state. For us it is important that in June 2006 we should make Kosovo a state. I am convinced we shall do that."—Kosovo Prime Minister Bajram Kosumi, on his timeline for attaining full independence and sovereignty (*AP*, 1/12/06).

"The Balkans has shown so far that its problems must not be underestimated. When I say that, I have the status of Kosovo in mind."—Macedonian President Branko Crvenkovski, after a meeting with Montenegrin President Filip Vujanovic (*AP*, 1/10/06).

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