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Bush has neglected the Balkans for too long

Laura Silber NYT

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A ticking time bomb

NEW YORK The crimes were abhorrent: mass executions, wholesale rape, gunpoint evictions of hundreds of thousands of people. Some took place before the eyes of diplomats, spies, peacekeepers, journalists, aid workers and even television viewers continents away. They proved to be so embarrassing to hand-wringing Western leaders that they were forced to order NATO to intervene and set up peacekeeping missions that still cost billions of dollars annually.

Despite all this, it seems that the Bush administration has forgotten how things work in the lands that once made up Yugoslavia. Preoccupied with Iraq and waging the "war on terrorism," Washington seems oblivious to a backslide in the region.

In Serbia, the same men who released a virulent strain of ethnic nationalism more than a decade ago are back, elected to Parliament on Dec. 28. Bosnia and Kosovo are festering wounds. Last month, Croatia's voters returned to power the same rightist party whose leaders took part in the ethnic cleansing of Bosnia a decade ago.

These developments portend the kind of trouble that can make ruins and ashes out of the money that has been poured into the Balkans by the United States and its allies. It is time Washington turned its attention to the problem.

In Serbia, long regarded as the keystone of the Balkans, nationalists have been mounting a comeback since the assassination last March of the country's pro-Western prime minister, Zoran Djindjic. Voters in Serbia's recent poll could find on their ballots the names of four men indicted for war crimes by the United Nations tribunal in The Hague. Two were elected: Slobodan Milosevic, engineer of Yugoslavia's violent disintegration, and Vojislav Seselj, a Serbian militia leader who once advocated scooping out the eyes of Croats with rusted spoons. Seselj's party won 82 of 250 seats; with Milosevic's Socialists they have 103 - enough to block reforms.

Neither of these men is likely to serve his term, because they are in jail in the Netherlands, making a mockery of both the elections and the tribunal. But in the distorted landscape of Serbia, neither of them is a pariah.

In Bosnia and Herzegovina, the picture is also grim. There is urgent need for a new constitution. The existing constitutional order was imposed by the U.S.-brokered Dayton agreement that ended the killing in Bosnia in 1995. But the agreement sanctioned a divided state hamstrung by layers of overlapping and contradictory constitutions, laws and administrations. The current dysfunction is dangerous and expensive. And no sober mind would pull NATO troops out until it is fixed.

Bosnia, under American pressure more than any other, is now rushing to create a court that will try accused war criminals at home. This seems like a thinly veiled effort by the Bush administration to shut down the UN court in The Hague. The ostensible reason is to cut costs, but the administration's disdain of international criminal courts is no secret. Washington is waiting for the Serbs to arrest their two most infamous war criminals, Radovan Karadzic and Ratko Mladic, and then close the tribunal down.

The status of Kosovo, which has been under UN administration since 1999, is the time bomb ticking under the Balkan body politic. The United States and the European Union have set 2005 as the deadline for Serbs and Kosovo's Albanians to begin talks over whether Kosovo will remain a part of Serbia or find some other fate. The United Nations has dragged its feet on transferring powers to the local Albanian leaders, meaning they cannot be held accountable for anything that goes wrong. This limbo allows radical Serbian and Albanian politicians to gather support.

Weak states with porous borders are fertile ground for organized crime and terrorists. This means America must act. Consistent support for a democratic reform process in the Balkans is the only way to resolve outstanding issues.

The reformers in Serbia should be helped to regroup. The Albanians and Serbs need to reach a deal on Kosovo. The European Stability Initiative, a research institute, has come up with a blueprint on which Bosnia's politicians and citizens might agree. It would create a simplified, three-layered federal state with 12 autonomous units.

If the United States fails to press for reforms in Bosnia, it could see its efforts of the last decade unravel throughout the region - as is already happening in Serbia.

The writer, a senior policy adviser at the Open Society Institute, is co-author of "Death of Yugoslavia."

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