

## **The UN and NATO are failing Kosovo**

**Misha Glenny** IHT

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### **Violence in Mitrovica**

**LONDON** In 2002, the European Stability Initiative, a Berlin-based research institute, issued a report that warned of the forthcoming "crisis of 2004" in the Balkans. The clock has been ticking determinedly ever since, but evidently not at a volume sufficient for policymakers to hear it above the din generated in Afghanistan and in Iraq.

On Wednesday, ethnic violence between Serbs and Albanians across Kosovo triggered the alarm. It was shrill and clear, signaling a serious failure of international policy in the province and in the wider Western Balkan region.

There is no doubt as to where responsibility lies. For good or ill, the international community took up the reins of government in Kosovo after the war between NATO and Yugoslavia in 1999. There is a Kosovo government headed by a prime minister, Bajram Rexhepi, but its powers are tightly circumscribed. For almost five years, the United Nations and the NATO-led Kosovo Force have exercised decisive authority over Kosovo's administration and security, spending hundreds of millions of dollars in the process.

No one expected this regime to effect a quick reconciliation of the two communities after the bitter conflict of the 1990s. But it was hoped that the international community would at least restore some vitality to Kosovo's economic life and offer a positive perspective for a future political settlement acceptable to both sides. Currently, Kosovo floats in a peculiar constitutional limbo defined by Security Council Resolution 1244. This stipulates that it remains part of Serbia but under the temporary aegis of the United Nations until all sides agree upon the province's "final status."

The start of talks between Serbs and Albanians last December reflected that the political process was moving forward, albeit at a snail's pace that has no discernible impact on the lives of ordinary people. No clear status means that nobody is willing to invest in Kosovo's miserably broken economy. And so the core of this crisis is social. Since the postwar reconstruction boom two years ago, the United Nations has presided over a resolute deterioration of economic conditions. As a direct consequence, both communities have provided thousands of young recruits to an army of the dispossessed and unemployed. With no money and the prospect only of further misery, frustration and anger have now reached a breaking point. Unless something changes, the situation will worsen and the United Nations' already weak authority will erode even further.

The stakes are high - the destabilization of Kosovo would result in further and more serious bloodshed in the province. But it could also have a deleterious effect on political and economic progress in Serbia, Montenegro, Macedonia and Bosnia. The international community does not have the resources to cope with further instability in Southeastern Europe.

Fortunately, there are solutions at hand. But they require swift and decisive action on the part of the international community if they are to succeed. The efficient dispatch of 1,000 extra NATO troops to the province should prove sufficient to quell the immediate problem, and there should be further reinforcements if necessary.

Then comes the hard part: addressing the problems of the divided city of Mitrovica; the return of refugees; the security of Serbian enclaves throughout Kosovo, and the social and

economic crisis throughout the province.

Mitrovica, the northern town divided by the River Ibar into a Serbian and an Albanian district since 1999, is a suppurating sore. Last week, Rexhepi and Oliver Ivanovic, a leader of the Mitrovica Serbs, jointly welcomed opening talks on a remarkable plan, also developed by the European Stability Initiative, that envisages the reunification of the city and the return of all refugees to their houses.

The northern, Serbian part of the city would join its neighboring municipality, which has a Serbian majority, to ensure that Serbs felt secure. Furthermore, the Serbian government would continue to assist the north financially. Many moderates from both communities supported this plan in public. The time has come for the international community to invest the political capital needed to broker a compromise agreement on Mitrovica.

Second, the issue of refugee return throughout Kosovo deserves much more attention than it has received until now. Despite the clichés about the impossibility of the two communities living in harmony, the experience of Bosnia-Herzegovina demonstrates the exact opposite. Almost all refugees there have returned home, in some cases to the scenes of devastating wartime atrocities. This remarkable achievement has largely been greeted by a deafening silence in the international media.

A lasting solution to the issue of refugee return is for the Kosovo government to be granted the means and responsibility to ensure security for minorities throughout the province. A mob cannot be held accountable; a government can. Protecting minorities effectively should be the main standard to meet before the world could address the issue of Kosovo's status.

Finally, there will be no stability in Kosovo without a credible economic development strategy, whatever the final status. The complete absence of ideas on how to achieve this has possibly been the biggest failure of the UN administration in Kosovo.

It's time to reconsider the international commitment to a multiethnic Kosovo. If the United Nations wavers on this, its mission will be adjudged a complete failure. This could have dramatic consequences for the region - and heaven help state-building missions elsewhere.

Misha Glenny's most recent book is "The Balkans: Nationalism, War and the Great Powers, 1804-1999." He is director of SEE Change 2004, which promotes regional cooperation in the Balkans.

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