

INTERNATIONAL
Herald Tribune

Report: Mistakes made in Bosnia should serve as lessons for Kosovo

International Herald Tribune
February 13, 2007

SARAJEVO, Bosnia-Herzegovina — Mistakes made in Bosnia should serve as lessons for officials who will supervise Kosovo if a new U.N. plan is approved for the Serbian province, a think tank said in a report.

The U.N. plan for Kosovo's status would grant internationally-supervised statehood to the province — a setup similar to the one imposed after the 1992-1995 war in Bosnia-Herzegovina, where international organizations had been given wide-ranging powers criticized by many.

The plan needs approval by the U.N. Security Council to come into force.

Under the U.N. proposal for Kosovo, the "international civilian representative" there would receive similar powers to those exercised by the U.N. police mission in Bosnia.

"From the outset, credible safeguards must be put in place to protect the rights of Kosovo residents," according to the report published over the weekend by the European Stability Initiative, or ESI, on its Web site.

International missions should be monitored by other independent bodies, the report said.

It proposed that a "powerful and independent ombudsman" be installed to investigate any complaints made by Kosovo citizens against the international mission.

"International organizations are made up of fallible men and women. However committed they are, when they take on the responsibility of governing a post-conflict territory, they must not be permitted to assume the posture and immunity of Olympian gods," the report said.

It pointed out the struggle of hundreds of Bosnia police officers who the United Nations barred from working without offering them the possibility to challenge its decisions.

The U.N. mandate between 1996 and 2002 was to oversee and supervise Bosnia's police forces, in addition to ridding them of officers thought to have committed crimes during the war or were thought to be under-qualified.

A total of 793 police officers were dismissed and banned for life from exercising police powers.

Although many of the officers won cases at Bosnian courts and the mistakes made in the vetting process were acknowledged by the Council of Europe's Venice Commission, the U.N. refuses to offer any remedy and warned Bosnian authorities not to challenge U.N. decisions.

Bosnia's minister for human rights and returnees, Mirsad Kebo, has threatened to begin a hunger strike if the EU's Human Rights Commissioner Thomas Hammarberg does not get involved.

After a two-day visit to Sarajevo in December 2006, Hammarberg concluded that there were "serious shortcomings" in the U.N. vetting procedure.

Bosnian authorities decided to take the issue into their own hands and formed a commission that will review the cases of 262 officers who have sought help from Bosnian courts.

The government in Sarajevo "rightly asserted that its first obligation is to protect the constitutionally guaranteed human rights of its citizens," the ESI report said.

But it expressed doubts that the commission will "ever see the light of the day" because of U.N. pressure.

"The lessons from this story are directly applicable to any post-conflict mission that the U.N. or the EU may conduct in the future," the report said.