



Balkan Experts Warn of Ethnic Violence in Kosovo

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At a Washington forum on what to do about the ethnically divided Kosovo town of Mitrovica, experts said there is an increased risk of renewed violence as the province moves towards staged independence from Serbia.

The United Nations administrator in Mitrovica, Gerard Gallucci, anticipates trouble over the next two months as Kosovo is likely put on a path towards independence. The province is part of Serbia but its 90 percent ethnic Albanian majority wants independence, which is fiercely opposed by Belgrade. Kosovo, one-third the size of Belgium, has been administered by the United Nations since 1999 when NATO forces drove Serbian troops out of the territory. Gallucci says the UN and NATO forces will protect the population in the event of trouble.

"Also, [we are determined] to preserve command and control of the ground and freedom for KFOR [NATO led force] and UNMIK [UN administration], but also to keep open the lines of dialogue, because dialogue is the first thing we will look to keep the situation from boiling over," said Gerard Gallucci.

Mitrovica, an industrial town in northern Kosovo, has been an ethnic flashpoint with its population divided by the Ibar River into a Serbian north and Albanian south. Some analysts say Serbia wants the territory north from Mitrovica to separate from Kosovo.

Another participant at the forum sponsored by the US Institute of Peace, Gerald Knaus, says Kosovo Albanians need to recognize that creation of a Serbian majority

municipality in Mitrovica is the best way to avoid violence and assure a peaceful, multi-ethnic solution in Kosovo.

"If we talk about decentralization for the Serbs it is northern Mitrovica that matters," said Gerald Knaus. "It is their only urban area in all of Kosovo, you know, with institutions, a university and a hospital. There is nothing threatening about this being a municipality."

Knaus rejects partition in Kosovo. Jacques Klein, a retired US Foreign Service officer with long experience in the Balkans, agrees that Kosovo's Albanians must do more to reach out to Kosovo Serbs.

"The price of being European is the price of multi-ethnicity," said Jacques Klein. "That's the key here. Now, it takes time. It takes effort."

Ethnic tensions remain high in Kosovo. The United Nations says this is due in large part to Belgrade's insistence that Kosovo Serbs not participate in Albanian majority local institutions. Five months of UN led negotiations on Kosovo's future have failed to narrow the differences between the two sides. The UN is contemplating a high level meeting next month between Serb and Kosovo Albanian leaders.