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Bosnia Defies U.N. Over Dismissals in Police

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LJUBLJANA, Slovenia, Feb. 9 — Acting against the wishes of the United Nations Security Council, the Bosnian government said Friday that it would review the status of almost 800 federal and local police officers that the United Nations barred from working in 2002.

In a challenge to the United Nations, Bosnian officials said a commission was examining whether police officers were unfairly barred from employment, either on the grounds that they might have committed crimes during the 1992-1995 civil war, or on the grounds that they were not properly qualified.

The officers were dismissed in 2002 as the United Nations mission in Bosnia and Herzegovina was ending. The United Nations had a mandate to overhaul the country's police forces after the war, but only five months to check the backgrounds of the officers. The government argues that the review performed by the United Nations was flawed and rushed, and that many officers could not appeal the dismissals.

The officers have gained widespread support among Bosnia's three main ethnic groups. But the issue also has taken on a broader significance because a number of international authorities have backed the government and said mistakes were made by the United Nations during the vetting process. The government's previous demands of the United Nations to re-examine the vetting process have been supported by the office of the High Representative, Christian Schwarz-Schilling of Germany, who is Bosnia's most-senior international official, as well as Europe's main human-rights authority, the Council of Europe.

The criticisms go to the heart of the United Nations mission here and the broad freedoms it had in exerting its powers.

The origins of the dispute date to the final months of the United Nations mission in Bosnia and Herzegovina, when

it needed to vet 18,000 police officers serving in 16 forces across the country. The process involved checking qualifications from schools, checking backgrounds with investigators at the United Nations war crimes tribunal in the Netherlands, and ensuring that officers had completed human-rights courses.

Subsequently, 793 officers were denied certification and dismissed from their jobs. Many of the police officers said they had not been told sufficiently and clearly why they had failed the vetting process, or they had not been truly able to appeal. The United Nations mission in Bosnia concluded its work at the end of 2002, and handed it over to a European Union-led police monitoring mission. Many officers began to dispute the United Nations decisions in Bosnian courts. In some cases, the courts concluded that there had been unlawful dismissal.

In June 2004, the secretariat of the United Nations helped draft a statement warning the Bosnian authorities not to challenge its decisions, and expressing concern that the government was not standing up to the police officers. For a time, the government stopped reviewing the cases but public pressure grew.

On Friday, a senior official in Bosnia's human rights ministry confirmed that the commission had been formed and that it would make its recommendations when the new government is in place next week.

A spokesman for the office of the Secretary General in New York declined to comment Friday on the United Nations' policy.

A report expected to be released this weekend by the European Stability Initiative, a research and policy group, takes aim at the United Nations secretariat, saying it failed to inform Security Council members about the extent of the problems with the vetting process.