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NATO'S ROLE IN RELATION TO THE CONFLICT IN KOSOVO

HISTORICAL OVERVIEW

Kosovo lies in southern Serbia and has a mixed population of which the majority are ethnic Albanians. Until 1989, the region enjoyed a high degree of autonomy within the former Yugoslavia, when Serbian leader Slobodan Milosevic altered the status of the region, removing its autonomy and bringing it under the direct control of Belgrade, the Serbian capital. The move was strenuously opposed by the Kosovar Albanians.

During 1998, open conflict between Serbian military and police forces and Kosovar Albanian forces resulted in the deaths of over 1,500 Kosovar Albanians and forced 400,000 people from their homes. The international community became gravely concerned about the escalating conflict, its humanitarian consequences, and the risk of it spreading to other countries. President Milosevic's disregard for diplomatic efforts aimed at peacefully resolving the crisis and the destabilising role of militant Kosovar Albanian forces was also of concern.

On 12 June 1998 the North Atlantic Council, meeting at Defence Minister level, asked for the assessment of possible further measures that NATO might take with regard to the developing Kosovo Crisis. This led to consideration of a large number of possible options.

On 13 October 1998, following a deterioration of the situation, the NATO Council authorised Activation Orders for air strikes. This move was designed to support diplomatic efforts to make the Milosevic regime withdraw forces from Kosovo, cooperate in bringing an end to the violence and facilitate the return of refugees to their homes. At the last moment, following further diplomatic initiatives including visits to Belgrade by NATO's Secretary General Solana, US Envoys Holbrooke and Hill, The Chairman of NATO's Military Committee, General Naumann, and the Supreme Allied Commander Europe, General Clarke, President Milosevic agreed to comply and the air strikes were called off.

UN Security Council Resolution 1199, among other things, expresses deep concern about the excessive use of force by Serbian security forces and the Yugoslav army, and calls for a cease-fire by both parties to the conflict. In the spirit of the UNSCR, limits were agreed for the number of Serbian forces in Kosovo, and for their scope of operations, following a separate agreement with Generals Naumann and Clark.

It was agreed, in addition, that the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) would establish a Kosovo Verification Mission (KVM) to observe compliance on the ground and that NATO would establish an aerial surveillance mission. The establishment of the two missions was endorsed by UN Security Council Resolution 1203. Several non-NATO nations that participate in Partnership for Peace (PfP) agreed to contribute to the surveillance mission organised by NATO.

In support of the OSCE, the Alliance established a special military task force to evacuate members of the KVM, if renewed conflict should put them at risk. This task force was deployed in the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia¹ under the overall direction of NATO's Supreme Allied Commander Europe.

Despite these steps, the situation in Kosovo flared up again at the beginning of 1999, following a number of acts of provocation on both sides, and the use of excessive and disproportionate force by the Serbian Army and Special Police. Some of these incidents were defused through the mediation efforts of the OSCE verifiers but in mid-January, the situation deteriorated further after an escalation in the Serbian offensive against Kosovar Albanians.

Renewed international efforts were made to give new political impetus to finding a peaceful solution to the conflict. The six-nation Contact Group² established by the 1992 London Conference on the Former Yugoslavia met on 29 January. It was agreed to convene urgent negotiations between the parties to the conflict under international mediation.

NATO supported and reinforced the Contact Group efforts by agreeing on 30 January to the use of air strikes if required, and by issuing a warning to both sides in the conflict. These concerted initiatives culminated in initial negotiations in Rambouillet near Paris, from 6 to 23 February, followed by a second round in Paris, from 15 to 18 March. At the end of the second round of talks, the Kosovar Albanian delegation signed the proposed peace agreement, but the talks broke up without a signature from the Serbian delegation.

Immediately afterwards, Serbian military and police forces stepped-up the intensity of their operations against the ethnic Albanians in Kosovo, moving extra troops and modern tanks into the Region, in a clear breach of compliance with the October agreement. Tens of thousands of people began to flee their homes in the face of this systematic offensive.

On 20 March, the OSCE Kosovo Verification Mission was withdrawn from the region, having faced obstruction from Serbian forces to the extent that they could no longer continue. Ambassador Holbrooke then flew to Belgrade, in a final attempt to persuade President Milosevic to stop attacks on the Kosovar Albanians or face imminent NATO air strikes. Milosevic refused to comply, and on 23 March the order was given to commence air strikes.

1 Turkey recognises the Republic of Macedonia with its constitutional name.

2 France, Italy, Germany, Russia, United Kingdom and United States.

MAIN ISSUES

NATO's goals in Kosovo are clear: a verifiable stop to all military action and the immediate ending of violence and repression; the withdrawal from Kosovo of the Yugoslav military, police and paramilitary forces; the stationing in Kosovo of an international military presence; the unconditional and safe return of all refugees and displaced persons; and credible assurance of Milosevic's willingness to work on the basis of the Rambouillet Accords towards a political solution for Kosovo in conformity with international Law and the Charter of the United Nations.

Responsibility for the current situation lies entirely with President Milosevic. He has the power to bring an immediate halt to NATO's military action by accepting and implementing fully these legitimate demands of the international community.

In the meantime, NATO forces have been at the forefront of the humanitarian efforts to relieve the suffering of many thousands of refugees forced to flee Kosovo by the deliberate Serbian ethnic cleansing campaign. In the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia¹, NATO troops have built refugee camps, a refugee reception centre, and an emergency feeding station, as well as moving many hundreds of tons of humanitarian aid to those in need. In Albania, NATO is deploying a substantial force to help in a similar manner. NATO is also assisting the UNHCR with co-ordination of humanitarian aid flights, and is in the process of supplementing these flights with Alliance members' aircraft. The outstanding work done by NATO personnel in a very short space of time has been highly praised by the UNHCR.