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TESTIMONY BY  
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BEFORE THE  
SENATE FOREIGN RELATIONS COMMITTEE

AT A HEARING ENTITLED:  
CIVIL WAR IN YUGOSLAVIA: THE UNITED STATES' RESPONSE

FEBRUARY 21, 1991

I am here to testify on the state of human rights in Yugoslavia. With me is Deputy Assistant Secretary James F. Dobbins of the Bureau of European and Canadian Affairs, who will deal with other aspects of current conditions affecting Yugoslavia and our relations with that country.

Having rejected Soviet domination as long ago as 1948, Yugoslavia embarked earlier than some of its neighbors on the road to a more open society and greater respect for human rights. But it has not as yet completed the process. In fact, as distinct from its neighbors, Yugoslavia has not made a clean break with its Communist past. It appears, instead, to work its way out of it gradually, with differing rates of progress in different parts of the country.

The democratic revolutionary fervor which swept the region in 1989 did indeed have its effect on Yugoslavia. The year 1990 saw significant movement toward increased respect for freedom of speech and freedom of religion. The League of Communists lost its monopoly on power and freely contested multi-party elections took place in all the republics. Toward the end of the year the Federal Assembly adopted a new press law which guaranteed freedom of information and ended the

subordination of the press to the Socialist Alliance of Working People, an arm of the League of Communists.

Though the ideological commitment to Communism is now a matter of the past, the forms of repression which were the hallmark of Leninist governmental systems have outlasted it. Moreover, the evaporation of Communist ideology in Yugoslavia has in many parts of the country been followed by the reemergence of rabid forms of nationalism. Even where elections were free and fair, the parties associated with democratic freedoms, respect for the individual, and equal rights for all did not fare particularly well. The utter failure of Communism is vividly demonstrated by the resurgence of extreme forms of nationalism which had been repressed rather than eliminated and which are now a threat not only to the basic rights of national minorities in the various republics but are also a threat to the Yugoslav state as an entity.

Credit must, under the circumstances, be given to the political leaders who continue to appeal to reason, who speak up for principles of democracy, respect for human rights, for cooperation among the republics, for a unified Yugoslavia in which equal rights would be accorded to all, irrespective of

their ethnic background and their place of residence. We wish these leaders well and hope for their success. As I mentioned earlier, freely contested multi-party elections took place in all of Yugoslavia's republics in 1990. In five of these republics one could not quarrel with the manner in which these elections were conducted. But in one republic, Serbia, in which about forty percent of Yugoslavia's population reside, the process was marred by late changes in election laws, the boycott of most Albanians in the autonomous province of Kosovo (which contains about twenty percent of Serbia's population), the intimidation of voters, and the manipulation of election procedures by the ruling party.

Although the actual voting in most of Serbia appeared to have been conducted correctly, Serbian authorities manipulated the media, which ignored, trivialized and disparaged opposition candidates and denied them equal access during the electoral campaign. The authorities also denied the opposition equal access to office space and financial resources and harassed opposition leaders by charging them with misdemeanors. The harassment by the authorities extended beyond opposition leaders to voters, who were warned not to vote for the opposition or risk dismissal from their jobs. The Serbian

elections were also marred by the ethnic Albanian boycott of the process, which was brought about by the repressive measures undertaken earlier against the ethnic Albanian population.

In Serbia it has been the Communist Party, now renamed, which has adopted a platform of nationalist extremism and has made Kosovo the issue which it now is. Kosovo plays a unique role in Serbian history. It was the Serbian heartland. In the battle of Kosovo on June 15 1389 the Serbian kingdom lost in its last major stand against the Ottoman Empire. The historic memory of the battle of Kosovo has been a part of Serbian national traditions, the subject of songs, for more than 600 years.

But in recent decades, the Serbian population of Kosovo has been on the decline and the ethnic Albanian population on the increase. Serbs in Kosovo increasingly felt that they were being overrun. Many of them emigrated. Those who stayed appealed to Belgrade for help. Given the Serbian historic attachment to Kosovo, that help came in the form of repression of Albanian aspirations.

The question at issue is what these aspirations are. Kosovo is now, as I noted earlier, an autonomous province

within Serbia, though its autonomy has de facto been suspended. Many Albanians want more than mere autonomy. Some support the creation of a Kosovo Republic within the Yugoslav Federation. Others may advocate secession and incorporation of the area into a greater Albania. Serbians oppose the notion of a Kosovo Republic first because it would separate the Serbian historic heartland from the Republic of Serbia and, second, because they see it as a first step to complete secession.

Tension between Serbians and ethnic Albanians in Kosovo has been on the increase for the last ten years. Conditions have worsened significantly during the last year.

In 1990 there were thousands of arrests of ethnic Albanians for political advocacy, tens of thousands of politically-related job dismissals, and widespread police violence. Local self-government was effectively eliminated in July of last year, when the Serbian government suspended the activities of governing bodies at the provincial and district level. Later in the year, delegates of the Kosovo legislature in an ex camera meeting approved a new constitution which declared Kosovo separate and sovereign within Yugoslavia. In reaction, Serbian authorities arrested four of the delegates and sought

to arrest the other 107, who avoided that fate by fleeing from Serbia to other republics of Yugoslavia or leaving the country altogether. They also began legal proceedings against former Kosovo government officials.

Serbian authorities also routinely and summarily sentenced thousands of ethnic Albanians in Kosovo to 30 to 60 days in jail, often on misdemeanor charges of "disturbing public order." Demonstrations by ethnic Albanians in protest of the Serb measures were broken up by police using tear gas, water cannon and lethal gunfire. As Serbian authorities broadly define "violence" to include virtually any public advocacy of political change, political speech in Kosovo that calls for republic or independent status for the province is viewed an incitement to violence and inevitably results in prosecution and prison sentences.

In contrast to other republics, restrictions on freedom of the press in Kosovo were especially severe. Almost all of Kosovo's Albanian-language media were completely suppressed and all local Albanian-language radio and television news broadcasts were halted. The largest Albanian-language newspaper was shut down.



To the human rights problems which I have just described we need to add the growing problem of hunger among the families of some 60,000 unemployed workers and the almost complete collapse of the Albanian-language school system. Many of the workers lost their livelihood for refusing to take oaths of allegiance to Serbia as a condition for employment. Many others were dismissed for participating in the strikes of September last year. Schools, especially high schools, are being hit hard as teachers are fired for refusing to accept Serbia's new education plan. A number of schools have been closed completely and Albanians in Kosovo expect more to follow.

Meetings of the Democratic Alliance of Kosovo, the largest independent political group in the province, are regularly broken up by the police and the organizers often harassed and beaten up. A particularly troublesome aspect of these developments is the growing feeling among Kosovo Albanians that they have no future within Yugoslavia.

The problem posed by the ethnic Albanians of Kosovo and their treatment at the hands of the government of the Republic of Serbia is not the only problem of inter-ethnic conflict in Yugoslavia. A problem involving larger population groups is the conflict between Serbs and Croats. Croatia has a

substantial Serbian population which considers itself deprived of its cultural rights and of equal opportunity in an increasingly nationalist Republic of Croatia. Serbs and Croats constitute significant percentages of the population of the Republic of Bosnia and Hercegovina. In order for there to be civil peace in these two republics, ways must be found for the two ethnic groups to live together. Here, too, the historic memory of a much more recent date stands in the way. Serbs suffered severely during World War II from the brutalities visited upon them by the Ustashi, the paramilitary force of the pro-Nazi Croatian wartime regime.

Our response to the problems which I have here described has been to call attention to them, express our concern to the Yugoslav authorities and, as my testimony shows, to offer support to those who are trying so hard to steer Yugoslavia toward democracy, the free market, and respect for the dignity of every single individual. Whether these leaders will succeed will depend on the support that they receive from the people of Yugoslavia. The Yugoslavs themselves will have to set their house in order. To the extent to which we can do so we shall try to be of help.