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THE CONTINUING STRUGGLE IN YUGOSLAVIA
THE HONORABLE HELEN DELICH BENTLEY
FEBRUARY 19, 1992

Mr. Speaker:

The crisis in Yugoslavia has reached a pivotal point in the negotiation of a political settlement. United Nations Secretary General Boutros Boutros-Ghali has decided on the rapid deployment of an estimated 13,000 peace-keeping troops into the disputed areas of Croatia, but objections from both President Tudjman of Croatia, and Milan Babic, leader of the Serb enclave of Krajina have slowed this process.

Croatian hesitation in accepting the U.N. peace plan has garnered many headlines in the last few weeks. This has caused enough concern that Germany, who spearheaded the European Community drive for recognition of Croatia, has been forced, not once, but twice, to lean on Tudjman to accept the plan unconditionally.

And once again, Tudjman is voicing objections to the plan. I quote Paul Lewis in last Friday's New York Times:

"Croatia's leader, Franjo Tudjman has said in recent interviews that he wants the force to stay only six months."

"In the letter that he sent Wednesday endorsing the United Nations plan, he spoke of "technical questions" regarding the rights of the peacekeepers in the Serbian enclaves of Croatia after the Serb-dominated Yugoslav Army withdraws."

Let me focus on these "technical questions" for a brief moment.

I quote from a February 12th Reuters article:

"Croatian television reported Tudjman assured Vance he was not introducing new conditions to the U.N. peace plan but wanted to resolve a number of technical issues including transport, trade, banking, protection of property, refugees, and maintenance of public order."

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"All the technical issues are ones that would require intervention of Croatian authorities, and reflect Tudjman's desire to assert his sovereignty over all the Serbian enclaves where U.N. troops would be posted, diplomats said." And another one the same day:

"Croatian leaders hope the U.N. plan will enable them to regain control of territory lost during the conflict"

"But U.N. Secretary-General Boutros Boutros-Ghali said in a report last week that Croatia would not control the territories when peace-keeping troops were stationed there.

Tudjman's "unconditional acceptance" is anything but. His current stance on the peacekeeping forces does not seem to sit well with his underlings. One minister, Drazen Budisa, resigned because of Tudjman's policy. And his Foreign Minister, Zvonimir Separovic seems to be unaware of Tudjman's unconditional acceptance of the peace-plan. I quote from a Reuters report last Friday:

"Croatia's foreign minister said on Friday a U.N. peace plan for Yugoslavia would delay, but not prevent Zagreb regaining control of territory seized by Serbs in seven months of fighting."

Separovic is quoted as saying, "Peacekeeping forces make it possible to bring peace to these regions and secure our borders as they were before. The alternative is continuing the war."

And Croatia certainly seems capable of doing that. According to Washington Post last week, Croatia is waiting on delivery of 100 MIG fighter aircraft, and many officials involved in the peace process have acknowledge that the international arms embargo on Yugoslavia is a dismal failure.

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An article by Chuck Sudetic in the January 31st New York Times also sheds some light on Tudjman's sincerity vis-a-vis the Serbian minority in Croatia. It states:

"Another [western diplomat] described the Croatian objections [to the peace plan] delivered to United Nations officials this week, a result of 'post recognition euphoria,' which he said emboldened officials in Zagreb to demand revisions after their Government gained recognition from Germany and then from the rest of the European Community."

The article continues later quoting another western diplomat:

"The Croats are obviously demanding explicit recognition from the United Nations that the disputed territory is Croatian and will be Croatian and that Croatia's constitution and laws will be valid there. This is obviously something that the Serbs will never go along with."

Summing up the current Croatian position, Mr. Sudetic states:

"While openly expressing support for the peacekeeping plan, according to one western diplomat, Croatian officials have threatened the United Nations team that Croat forces would invade Bosnia-Herzegovina to save Croats in that multi-ethnic tinderbox republic."

"Croatian officials have repeatedly warned that Zagreb will use force if necessary to retake Serb-held areas."

And then later:

"Croatia's foreign minister, Zvonimir Separovic, confirmed Serb fears that Croatia may not agree with a long-term presence of peacekeeping forces in the disputed areas."

"We are prepared to risk a certain amount of time, maybe the six months planned for the deployment, maybe even one extension," Mr. Separovic said in an interview published Wednesday in Frankfurter Rundschau, a German newspaper. "But there is no way they will be here for 10, 15, or 20 years. That is out of the question."

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This is just one side of the situation that warrants my concern. Finally coming to light is an area about which I have spoken many times. Helsinki Watch has just published a report on human rights violation perpetrated by the Croats against the ethnic Serb minority in Croatia. I quote from an AP wire report regarding the release of this document by Helsinki Watch:

"The U.S. based Helsinki Watch Committee called Friday for the Croatian government to investigate human rights violations, including executions and torture."

It continues:

"Laws of war violations attributable to the Croatian government it said, include the 'summary executions of civilians and unarmed combatants; the torture and mistreatment of detainees; arbitrary arrests and disappearances; and the destruction of civilian property."

I believe many of us are aware by now of the mass killing of ethnic Serbs perpetrated by the Croats in Gospic that was detailed in the January 25th New York Times.

Since the outbreak of hostilities, I have viewed countless videotapes, both professional propaganda efforts out of Belgrade, and amateur footage, of alleged atrocities committed against Serbs in the current conflict.

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I am aware that such tapes are also widely distributed by the Croatian lobby here in the U.S. If anything, this indicates that one must take them with the requisite grain of salt, but it is hard not to believe what one sees with ones own eyes. I even know of one documented instance of footage broadcast on German television, where Serbian victims were represented as Croats. After this was discovered, the bodies were repatriated to Serbia.

Everything that I have brought up today is indicative of the mood of intolerance and revenge that has been fueling the current civil war, and of the misinformation that has been obscuring the many of issues that must be addressed if there is to be a comprehensive solution to the crisis. The war started because of the human rights concerns of the Serbian minority in Croatia, and their human rights continue to be blatantly violated, not just in the war zones, but also throughout the republic.

Offers of autonomy for the Serbian minority in Croatia by the Tudjman government have been orchestrated for consumption by the international community, but do not bear close scrutiny. Tudjman's promise of more minority guarantees was just paying lip service to the demands of Germany and the EC for recognition. To my knowledge, no representatives of the Serbian minority in Croatia took part in that process, which one would think would be the first step if the process were to be considered legitimate.

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Even the Badinter report expressed reservations on Croatia's human rights guarantees. Despite this, Croatia was recognized by the EC. Since recognition, Zdravko Tomac, Deputy Prime Minister of Croatia, has been quoted in Danas, regarding Tudjman's promise of expanded minority rights as saying that, "Croatia has no need to change the Law on Minorities because it is in agreement with the Hague Conference", and that, "What the Arbitration has requested is already contained in the law." This is patently false, and I think of great concern.

In fact, the Washington Post recently published an editorial on the very subject of the independence wishes of the Krajina region. It states:

"Here is the dilemma of Croatian self determination. From a distance, 'Croatia' looks like an integral territory easily broken off and accorded recognition and independence in the name of high principle. But what about those Serbs in Croatia who to this day have not received constitutional guarantees of their minority rights and shows in any event resist living in other than a Serbian country."

The editorial continues later:

"Recognition of Krajina's right to self-determination would amount to dismemberment of Croatia and would build in an irredentist cause. But how is its claim to secession or independence any less worthy than Croatia's?"

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In addition, it has come to my attention that just last Friday, the Croatian Parliament condemned the post-war conviction of Cardinal Alojzige Stepinac. Stepinac was a Roman Catholic Cardinal who was intimately involved with the Nazis and the World War II Ustashe government, and who was tried and convicted on war crimes. This echoes Tudjman's previous actions regarding the renaming of the Square of Victims of Fascism, a pivotal point in the events leading up to the current civil war.

What I find of even more concern is an AP wire report on February 11th that reports that President Tudjman is purging the Croatian language. I quote from this report:

"All word considered Serb, Yugoslav, or 'international' have been struck from TV, radio, and the official press in a campaign to return to Slavic roots."

It continues:

"Rulers of Croatia's fascist Ustasha state in World War II also tried to purge foreign word from everyday use."

I might add, Mr. Speaker, that another individual tried to do the same thing with the German language about 50 years ago. His name was Adolf Hitler.

The wire report ends with a quote from a Serbian free-lance journalist living in Zagreb. I quote:

"Both educated Serbs and Croats will resist forced changes. It has nothing to do with nationality. it's just a quite twisted attempt to change consciousness.... All totalitarian regimes try to do the same. There's a language of rulers and a language of the people."

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I would also point out that Stipe Mesic was recently quoted in the German newspaper Die Zeit as saying the only Serbs left in Croatia will be dead ones.

The Republic of Croatia's record on human rights is dismal, not that Serbia's is much better. I think it is important for people to recognize this, and use appropriate caution in analyzing the current situation, or espousing support for one side or another in this bloody civil war.

To sum up, an editorial in the January 27th Washington Post does an excellent job of putting the current civil war in the Balkans in the proper perspective.

The most important U.S. policy goal at this point in time should not be to recognize Croatia, but to ensure the placement of U.N. troops to separate the warring factions and therefore protect the human rights of all groups involved. In fact, former U.N. Ambassador Dirk Jan van Houten, at a Helsinki Commission hearing held here less than two weeks ago, echoed this sentiment, recommending that the U.S. hold off on recognition for fear of rekindling the conflict.

The editorial states:

"There is no taking back whatever inadvertent license may have been given outside parties -- as when, for instance, Germany "unconditionally" recognized an independent Croatia whose regulars as well as irregulars (and of course Serbia's too) stand plausibly accused of hideous crimes. Perhaps the Germans, so eager to assert leadership in the new Europe, can break of the celebration of 'democratic self-determination' in Croatia and drop a word about human rights."

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Let us address human rights concerns first, and only then, act on recognition. It is important that the U.S. maintain its flexibility in addressing the issue of human rights without restrictions like those that the EC has inadvertently set for itself by unconditional recognition of the break-away republics.