

# War propagandists for hire

## Croatia, Bosnia use Western public relations firms to win support

By MIKE TRICKEY  
Southern News

TORONTO — It was a preposterous yarn ignored by North American media but circulated in Islamic nations where it could do the most damage.

The story claimed Maj-Gen. Lewis MacKenzie, Canadian head of the United Nations Peacekeeping Forces in Bosnia, was raping and then murdering Muslim women supplied to him by the Serbs.

The charges were part of a smear campaign against the peacekeepers who are viewed by the Bosnian government as obstacles to their success in a civil war against rebel Serbs, Maj-Gen. MacKenzie recalls.

He asserts it was spread by the Bosnian government, with assistance from a major public relations firm.

"I can understand why they would do something like that," says the retiring officer. "If I had been in their position and found that the peacekeeping force was not what I had wanted, I can envision my devious mind working out a story to discredit them."

Character assassination, both of individuals and nations, is not a new tactic in war.

### Hired pros

What's different today is the use of hired guns — the spin doctors of war — who have taken over much of the activity once exercised by government and military propaganda departments.

Even a country like Bosnia, with little expertise in media manipulation, can call one of the dozens of major Western public relations firms that will do business with anyone willing to pay.

"All the poor old Bosnian government has is an IMARSAT (satellite telephone)," says Maj-Gen. MacKenzie. "It's not likely they

could have done this on their own.

"It would appear, due to the widespread coverage that story got in Muslim nations, as well as in Germany and Croatia, that somebody familiar with the methods of distributing that sort of disinformation was certainly involved."

The use of professional public relations firms has grown substantially over the past 10 or 15 years, says Jerold Manheim, director of the National Centre of Communications Studies at George Washington University.

"These companies are applying social science techniques to evaluate the effectiveness of their message. They are much more strategic (than military propagandists) in structuring their campaigns and in determining who is to be targeted."

The nature of the message has also changed with the end of the Cold War, as there is no longer a single, easily defined opponent.

"Propaganda used to be much cruder," explains John MacArthur, author of *Second Front*, a book exposing the level of media manipulation during the Gulf war.

"It used to be simply to help our side win. What's scary now is that it's being done in the name of human rights and morality. The more you can get human rights organizations to designate their side as the aggressor and your side as the victim, the better chance you've got of gaining support for yourself."

As columnist Lewis Lapham notes in this month's *Harper's* magazine: "Unlike the old Soviet empire, the kingdom of hell can be relied upon never to go bankrupt or to abandon the war for the soul of mankind."

Rapes and dead babies have always aroused strong reactions.

The best-known episode of this type was the selling of the Gulf war by public relations giant Hill and



MacKenzie claims smear by pros known.

They produced a 15-year-old girl (identified only as Naryah, who testified before a congressional committee that she had seen Iraqi soldiers tearing Kuwaiti babies from hospital incubators).

The girl was subsequently revealed to be the daughter of Kuwait's ambassador to the United States and her story proved false, but not before it mobilized overwhelming public support for U.S. military action.

A similar approach is being taken in the public relations war in the former Yugoslavia, where all the combatants have hired Western firms to get their message out and portray the others as blood-thirsty killers.

Jim Harff, president of Ruder Finn Global Public Affairs, which represents Kosovo and Croatia, says the public relations battle is as important as what's happening on the ground.

"In terms of persuading and convincing the UN to take the proper measures, it's even more important."

Documents filed with the U.S. Justice Department show Croatia is paying Ruder Finn \$10,000 a month plus expenses to present "a positive, Croatian image to mem-

bers of Congress, administration officials and the news media."

Bosnia pays a firm for services which include "writing and placing op-ed articles, guest columns and letters to the editor," and to "fully communicate its positions in the United States on issues relative to its current state of war with Serbia."

Trying to counter public relations gains by their rivals, Serb representatives were canvassing Canadian firms this week, hoping to find a company willing to work for them despite the United Nations economic sanctions imposed on the country.

Though generally considered the aggressors in the Yugoslav conflict, the Serbs did not become international pariahs until last summer after sanctions moved London-based Ian Greer Associates to drop their contract.

"In situations where normal diplomatic channels fall down, this is an effective alternative method of communication," says Ann Pettifor, who worked on the Serb account. "They were concerned about the unbalanced reporting of atrocities and so it is natural they would seek out these methods and expertise."

Second- and third-hand reports of atrocities should be regarded with a great deal of skepticism, advises Keith Krause of York University's Centre for International and Strategic Studies.

"There's a growing sophistication among factions at war about communications. That progression makes it more difficult to disentangle what's really happening. It also creates an ever-growing potential for the big lie."

In the Balkans, where the warring factions are physically indistinguishable, it's not uncommon for a video clip of a mass slaughter or other such atrocity to show up on a

number of different state-run television outlets, each carrying a different audio version of who perpetrated the crime.

Croatia became the public opinion winner in its war with Serb rebels after it was able to shift international focus to Serbian aggression and away from its own fascist past and its modern adoption of symbols from that era.

"The Croatians were far more active than the Serbs during that period," says Mr. Manheim, adding that the worldwide Internet computer link for academics "carried a series of messages about all the terrible things the Serbs were doing, but there was nothing from the other side."

### Pushing policy

Ruder Finn, which has decades of experience in representing foreign governments in Washington, scored another coup in the final days of the Bush administration when the White House warned Belgrade it would not tolerate aggression against Kosovo.

"That was quite a change from the previous year when the emphasis was on the integrity of the borders. Getting (former secretary of state Lawrence) Eagleburger to name names and talk of war crime trials was obviously a breakthrough," says Mr. Harff, who had worked for three congressmen over an eight-year period.

It is those kinds of successes, some of which could drag a third country into war, that encourage voiceless nations and factions to hire the lobbying pros.

"They certainly should," says Mr. Harff. "We can tell their stories to the people it has to be told to. We know the modern techniques, know how to develop and convey the messages. If you're going to win these wars, you've got to have public opinion in your corner."

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