

Bentley lobbies for a more favorable view of Serbia

By Tom Bowman
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WASHINGTON — As the United States moves closer to joining a multinational military force to end the Serbian siege of Sarajevo, Rep. Helen Delich Bentley is making last-ditch efforts in Congress in the opposite direction.

She's calling for evenhandedness.

"All sides — Muslims, Croats, Serbs — are guilty in fomenting the ongoing violence," said Mrs. Bentley, the Baltimore County Republican who has emerged as the chief defender of Serbia, widely viewed by others as the chief aggressor in the region.

"We must be careful not to show a . . . bias toward one group over another, not to be dragged unwittingly into a war thousands of miles away," she said.

Last week she tried — unsuccessfully — to amend a foreign spending bill so that aid would be denied to all the former Yugoslav re-

publics until they sit down and negotiate a peace.

Only a U.S.-led peace conference can work, said Mrs. Bentley, a conservative lawmaker and frequent critic of Bush administration policy. She fears a military solution would dissolve into another Vietnam. She recalled that Yugoslavia kept 15 Nazi divisions tied up during World War II.

But behind the work of this daughter of Serbian immigrants lies her support for Serbian moves in the region, even though the United States has already recognized the independence of the breakaway republics.

Eventually, Mrs. Bentley believes that a lasting peace would require redrawing the borders of republics along ethnic lines, achieving through negotiated settlement what is now being attempted through the barrel of a gun.

Writing last fall in *Mediterranean Quarterly*, a global-issues journal, she said ethnic claims would

be based on historic enclaves.

"Kosovo province would remain Serbian," she wrote, explaining that ethnic Albanians there would not be allowed a vote because they were moved in by Yugoslav leader Josip Broz Tito during World War II. The ethnic Albanians — 90 percent of Kosovo's population — could either accept citizenship in Serbia or "return to Albania, their homeland," she wrote.

Such proposals may serve to increase tensions, especially in Kosovo, a region viewed as the next hot spot in the Balkan crisis. Some question the wisdom of new borders. Rep. William S. Broomfield of Michigan, senior Republican on the Foreign Affairs Committee, says there are parts of Yugoslavia where Serbs, Croats and Muslims are living together in peace.

"She feels strongly the Serbian position is right. I support the independence of these areas," said Mr. Broomfield. "She is still very strong for a Greater Serbia."

"The Serbs quite simply didn't have anyone championing their cause," said a congressional staff person, noting that the Serbian republic, led by President Slobodan Milosevic, was "clearly the old [Communist] regime and the bad guys, and Helen Delich Bentley was the only one who championed the Serbian cause."

Mrs. Bentley — who has co-sponsored numerous anti-Communist bills in her seven years on Capitol Hill — disputes suggestions that her actions amount to a defense of the last hard-line Communist state in Europe.

"I am not defending the regime, I am defending the Serbian people. I think there's a big difference," said Mrs. Bentley, now the driving force behind Serbian American National Information Network Inc. (Serb-net), an ambitious lobbying and public relations network designed to advance the Serbian cause.

Mrs. Bentley last week publicly joined the calls for Mr. Milosevic's resignation, saying she told him so face-to-face last month. She also said she has worked with the opposition groups in Serbia, hoping an alternative leader can emerge.

A senior Bush administration official said Mrs. Bentley is serving an important function, calling her "one of the few Americans who can really reach Milosevic and give him criticism."

Serbia must take blame for its "share" of the fighting in Bosnia, acknowledged Mrs. Bentley. But she has repeatedly complained that Croatian forces are fighting there with heavy weapons from Germany, a point recently brought out in news accounts. She gestured to a newspaper photograph of a captured Muslim fighter in Bosnia wearing a Serbian uniform.

"There have been 280 Serbian Orthodox churches that have been destroyed in Croatia and Bosnia. We haven't heard about that," she said.