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STATEMENT OF THE HONORABLE HELEN DELICH BENTLEY  
BEFORE THE MEDITERRANEAN QUARTERLY  
YUGOSLAV CRISIS WORKSHOP  
DECEMBER 5, 1991

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Minority protest  
Parliament / Italy

First of all, I would like to thank Professor Stavrou, and the Mediterranean Quarterly, for inviting me to address the workshop, and also say that it is indeed a pleasure to be able to speak on this issue that is on the forefront of so many of our minds.

The crisis in Yugoslavia has now entered its sixth month, and unofficial estimates have placed the death toll at over 20,000 people on all sides of this unfortunate situation. Through the efforts of Cyrus Vance and Lord Carrington a shaky 14th cease-fire has been reached, and although the JNA is continuing its attack on Osijek, and each side is claiming violations, Cyrus Vance is pressing on with negotiations, albeit pessimistically.

The JNA is continuing its withdrawal from barracks in and around Zagreb, although some units are not being allowed to leave because of Croatian demands that their equipment be left behind. The navy has lifted its blockade on the majority of the Dalmatian coast, with the conspicuous exception of Dubrovnik, where I understand that the parties are involved in negotiations to come to a final settlement.

According to reports this morning, Stipe Mesic has resigned from the federal presidency.

I think that it is becoming clear that the Yugoslav situation is much more complicated than first portrayed by the majority of the western media, and also that there are a number of agendas being acted out by the various players involved. The governments of Croatia and Serbia, the federal army, and a number of independent groups, all have differing aims for an acceptable end to the conflict.

In addition, the divided stance of the European Community, and other European countries, regarding the proper course of action in the present conflict, has added another layer to the already difficult question of what should be done to bring it to an end.

Croatia is pressing hard for international recognition with the backing of Germany, Austria, and Italy, and I fear that if granted before the end of the conflict, this will just serve to exacerbate any willingness on the Serbian side to end the hostilities.

There has never been, and in my opinion, never will be an easy solution to the religious and ethnic problems that have thrown the Balkan peninsula into turmoil. However, any solution will have to take into account the wishes of the people, as opposed to the wishes of the current governments, into account in order to be effective.

Nationalism is the culprit in the current crisis, stirred up by Milosevic and Tudjman, and while various fingers have been pointed to place blame on one party or another, I believe that there is more than enough to go around.

Display or use of force, however, is not the way to solve the crisis, and in one breath I will condemn all players involved for the escalation of the concern of the Serbian minority in Croatia to enjoy their right to live without being prosecuted into the current bloodbath.

But we must not lose sight of the basis of the current conflict in Croatia. These are the rights of the Serbian minority in Croatia,

and the establishment of just and realistic borders between Croatia and Serbia.

The Serbian minority rights suffered previous to, and continue to suffer after the outbreak of hostilities. After elections in Croatia, President Franjo Tudjman did not do much to allay the fears of a repeated genocide against to this much maligned minority. Tudjman is both openly anti-semitic and a holocaust revisionist. In fact, a November 25th New Republic article by Robert D. Kaplan reviews one of his recent publications, Wastelands -- Historical Truth.

I quote from this article:

"Tudjman's primary concern is not the fate of the Jews, but the role of the Croats in the mass murder of Serbs. Yet the route his mind travels on the way to his destination is telling: 'The estimated loss of up to 6 million dead is founded too much on both emotional, biased testimonies and on exaggerated data in the postwar reckoning of war crimes and squaring of accounts with the defeated ... in the mid-'80s, world Jewry still has the need to recall its "holocaust" by trying to prevent the election of the former U.N. Secretary General Kurt Waldheim as President of Austria!'

Mr. Kaplan continues later in the article regarding the Jasenovac concentration camp:

"Jasenovac was a World War II concentration camp manned by the Croatian Ustashe in which Jews, Gypsies, and, more significantly, Serbs were murdered. For decades Serbs have maintained that 'at least 700,000' people were killed at Jasenovac. Croats have long said that the number was more like 60,000. The discrepancy between these two sums is as good litmus test as any for the vastness of the psychological gulf separating Serbs from Croats...."

"But for Tudjman, the figure of 60,000 given by Croat nationalists is still too high: he reckons no more than 40,000 inmates perished..."

"As he explains it, even the figure of 40,00 overstates Ustashe crimes, since the liquidation apparatus was largely controlled by Jews..."

"Therefore, according to Tudjman, the mass murder of Serbs by Croats during World War II is not an issue, since not all that many Serbs were killed in the first place, and those who were slaughtered were mainly done in by the Jews. Case closed."

President Tudjman also invited the return to Croatia of the Croatian Party of the Pure Right, by which he currently is being threatened, previously banned from Yugoslavia under communism.

Many of the Ustashe movement's principals escaped Europe and Nuremberg War Crime trials after the war, and some members of the Croatian emigree community have openly sympathized with the movement, returning to join Dobroslav Paraga's reincarnated Party of the Pure Right.

Tudjman's government enacted a series of laws redesignating the Serbian minority in Croatia, which it previously had considered an equal, as a national minority. He denied their rights to the use of the Cyrillic alphabet, and while officially denied as government policy, also forced ethnic Serbs living in Croatia to sign loyalty oaths to the Republic of Croatia under threat of termination of employment.

Serbs in Croatia were fired en-masse from government controlled jobs, and local political officials went to pains to mark Serbian homes with crosses, reminiscent of similar actions during the Second World War.

Even today, Serbs living in the metropolitan centers in Croatia still are forced to sign loyalty oaths, and frequently are harassed and discriminated against, their houses and churches subject to vandalism, themselves subject to threats of bodily harm and death. This has resulted in thousands of Serbs leaving Zagreb, which had a population of around 100,000 before the outbreak of hostilities.

Compare this to the approximately 100,000 Croats currently residing in Belgrade, who report very few, if any instances of this type focused towards them as Croats living in Serbia.

I quote Dr. John Lampe, specialist on Balkan affairs at the Woodrow Wilson Center, from his November 1991 report, Yugoslavia from Crisis to Tragedy:

"[We have seen] the trumpeting of constitutional provisions and national symbols that make the Croats the only "nationality" (others are 'pucanstva,' or populations without recognized ethnic identity, or at best, 'minority groups'). While the new government did not order the loyalty oaths to Croatia and the firing of Serbs at enterprise that has widely occurred, neither has it intervened to prevent such abuses."

I also quote David Martin in the November 22nd New York Times article entitled "Croatia's Borders: Over the Edge". Mr. Martin is an authority on Yugoslavia, having served there with the OSS in the Second World War, and since having written many books on that area of the world, including Web of Disinformation: Churchill's Yugoslav Blunder, a critical expose on the complicity of Kim Philby and his circle of communists in allowing Tito to assume control of Yugoslavia.

"Franjo Tudjman, Croatia's President and former Tito general, has done little to alleviate Serbian's fear of an independent Croatia. He said last year that the Ustashe regime, which ruled occupied Croatia from 1941 to 1945, 'reflected the centuries old aspirations of the Croat people.' A recent article in The Guardian of London quoted Mr. Tudjman as saying he was thankful that his own wife did not have any Jewish or Serbian blood, and that for the Jews, 'genocidal violence is a natural phenomenon, in keeping with the human-social and mythological-divine nature. It is not only allowed, but even recommended.'"

"Mr. Tudjman's treatment of the Serbs has gone beyond this unfortunate rhetoric. Since Croatia declared independence in June,

the Serbs in Croatia have been the victims of a campaign of harassment. Serbs working for the Croatian government were dismissed. Serbian schools were banned. The Victims of Fascism Square in Zagreb was renamed the Square of the Sovereigns of Croatia. Mr. Tudjman's decision to adopt a flag modeled on the Ustashe flag has only made matters worse."

As I stated in my article for the fall issue of the Mediterranean Quarterly, and as I still maintain, current EC insistence on recognizing the administrative boundaries of Tito's communist regime as the legitimate boundaries of an Independent State of Croatia is myopic and unrealistic if there is to be a solution to the Yugoslav crisis.

Tito's gerrymandering of these administrative boundaries to weaken Serbian influence is historical fact, he himself having said a weak Serbia is a strong Yugoslavia. In addition to the change of these boundaries were the forced patriation of Albanians into the Kosovo province, and Croatians into Serbian majority areas in Croatia.

Tudjman has maintained a hard line stance on the Croatian border question that has been based on borders drawn under Tito's communist regime. I regard these as illegal, as all actions under a totalitarian regime should be considered. If the border question must be addressed, let it be based on a Yugoslavia that was not altered under Nazi and Communist rule, using, as I have advocated, the borders that existed previous to 1941, or even 1936.

David Martin, in the same article that I quoted above states:

"However well intentioned, the community and the U.S. are misguided in their approach. Yugoslavia's internal borders are recent inventions of a communist dictator and have no historical validity...."

"The Serbs cannot be blamed for fearing the rebirth of an extremist Croatia. But one must ask the community and the U.S. why frontiers established by a communist dictator, no matter how much they may violate the more compelling concept of ethnic frontiers, must be considered legally valid for all time."

"Politically stability cannot be achieved by giving Mr. Milosevic ultimatums. Surely there is a more moral, humane and politically acceptable way of delineating frontiers. For example, shouldn't some provision be made for the use of a plebiscite or for arbitration procedures? Even now, it may not be too late for the community to shift its position in a manner that allows for frontier changes in both directions."

"There is much evidence that the Serbian public would favor a compromise settlement. Among other things, there has been little persecution of Croats in Serbia."

Official U.S. policy up to this point in time has been to follow the lead of the European Community. The U.S. does not favor recognition of the break-away republics, and has followed with economic sanctions parallel to those of the EC.

In Congress, the Croatian lobbying and media effort, spearheaded by Ruder-Finn, has managed to sway a number of members towards supporting the goals of the breakaway republics. The Croats have created a campaign of misinformation that has reduced the current conflict into dualistic terms, good versus evil, democratic versus communist. This type of argument, I am afraid, is the easiest for a member to bite into, as most do not want to be bothered by petty details.

However, already some dangerous precedents have been set by the U.S. EC mismanagement of the current crisis must not be transferred to the U.S. if the U.S. is to act as a mediator or become more involved in the Yugoslav civil war.

I shudder to think of U.S. troops being sent to Yugoslavia under the aegis of the U.N. or NATO into a war that even the majority of Yugoslavs do not want to fight in.

Recognition of the breakaway republics must be preceded by a full and demonstrated guarantee for human rights by those republics. Previous offers of autonomy by the Tudjman government have been orchestrated for consumption by the international community, but do not bear close scrutiny.

Even the latest effort in the Croatian Parliament is just paying lip service to the demands of Germany to have laws in place to guarantee minority rights before recognition by that country. To my knowledge, no representatives of the Serbian minority in Croatia have taken part in that process, which one would think would be the first step if the process were to be considered legitimate.

In addition, the latest effort would only take place under the preconditions of a new census and new elections in the Serb dominated areas, ostensibly after a cease of hostilities, ergo after recognition of Croatia.

Even Italian Foreign Minister Gianni de Michelis has been critical of this latest effort, stating for the press yesterday, "There are a few points that are unsatisfactory for [the Italian] minority. In particular the rights envisaged for them are not as full as those the Italian minority enjoys in Slovenia."

How can Croatia justify its own political autonomy without guaranteeing the same for the Serbian minority in that republic?

EC policy has been obviously divided in the current crisis. While Germany, Austria, and Italy have been outspoken advocates for immediate recognition for Croatia and Slovenia, others have been more cautious in their assessment of the breakaway republics wishes.

This division, and especially the vocal advocacy of Germany, Austria and Italy for Croatian and Slovenian independence, makes it obviously clear that these countries are pushing their own agendas of political and economic influence, and not the more important agenda of a united EC policy for a lasting and just peace for the Balkan peninsula.

As the war progresses, the actions of the main players are getting more and more outrageous. With a lack of press freedom in both republics, the true voice of the people is not being heard. Instead the populus is being blasted with propoganda from their respective governments, widening the schism between two groups that lived in harmony for many years.

Atrocity reports abound on both sides of this unfortunate situation, and I do not doubt that they exist, fueled by the martial attitudes touted by their respective leaders.

There are a host of questions to be answered if there is to be a solution to the crisis. Blame can, and should, be addressed to both sides of the current conflict. Both Tudjman's and Milosevic's maintenance of a hard-line stances regarding the recognized problems of minority rights and border resolution are doing nothing to lead to a peaceful end of the Yugoslav crisis.

The current overtures for peace by both parties, and willingness to allow peace-keeping forces into the disputed areas, are a step in the right direction to ending this senseless conflict. However, the complicity of certain countries in the EC towards the wishes of the Republic of Croatia has seemingly doomed this effort by removing impartiality from the peace equation, the vital ingredient if efforts to end the hostilities are to succeed.

Let us hope that with the latest attempts by Cyrus Vance and Lord Carrington to come to a resolution of, or at least halt the bloodshed, that the attitude of irrationality and unwillingness to compromise that defines the current conflict can be overcome, and a lasting peace taking into account the concerns of all parties can be forged. If it is not, we will be facing a long, bloody engagement that could involve the whole of the Balkan peninsula, with a loss of life that makes the current hostilities look tame in comparison.