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Congress of the United States
House of Representatives

Washington, DC 20515

September 5, 1991

CHRISTOPHER H. SMITH

4TH DISTRICT, NEW JERSEY

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The Honorable Dennis DeConcini, Co-Chairman
Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe
H2-237 Ford HOB
Washington, D.C. 20515

Dear Mr. Chairman:

Last night I returned from a difficult, somewhat dangerous but extremely productive and useful trip to Croatia and Serbia. I was joined by Rep. Frank Wolf and former Under Secretary of State Richard McCormick.

In Zagreb, we held meetings with Croatian officials including a two hour working lunch with Croatian President Franjo Tudjman.

The President expressed deep appreciation for our physical presence in Croatia as the violence was escalating in and around his capital and told us how vital U.S. and EC involvement was to a peaceful outcome. He said that the borders of his republic "should not change by force" and lamented, at one point, that Croatia did not have sufficient firepower to adequately defend itself. Presidential advisors at the table were quick to point out that Croatia contributes financially and sends its young men to the Yugoslavian army which was now fighting against its own republic. President Tudjman said the U.S. was "missing the train" by not being more active in the earlier weeks of the crisis and said it was his view that U.S. policy was wrongly predicated on the notion that the "Yugoslavian nation can and will be saved."

Our delegation's message stressed military restraint, negotiation and reconciliation. President Tudjman expressed solidarity with our view and said how pleased he was that we were there on the eve of his ultimatum that the Army pull out of Croatia before the situation quickly escalates into a full fledged civil war.

President Tudjman said he was encouraged that the U.S. State Department had just officially endorsed the EC blueprint for a cease-fire and peace conference.

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We attempted to visit Serb leaders in Zagreb to obtain their point of view but were advised by U.S. officials and Croatian leaders that most had fled as the fighting intensified.

We spent an hour with Cardinal Kuharich and Archbishop Koksha at the Roman Catholic Cathedral in Zagreb. The Cardinal said the faithful were being implored to pray and work for peace, and that approximately 40 churches were either destroyed or adversely affected by the clashes thus far. He said Croatian prisoners returning from Serbia had been "severely beaten" and that the Yugoslavian Air Force had been bombing civilian populations.

We met with Marco Hennis, one of the leaders of the EC observers who operate in Slovenia pursuant to a memorandum of understanding hammered out in July. A discussion of their apparent success in Slovenia and the need for similar activity in Croatia was discussed. He said they were "satisfied" with the "mediating role" the EC is playing. According to Hennis, the EC daily deploys approximately 10-15 small teams to observe compliance with the cease-fire in Slovenia. He expressed his opinion that a cease-fire in Croatia was needed but that the "situation in Croatia is of a different nature."

In order to more adequately assess the situation on the ground where active fighting was occurring and to tangibly underscore a compelling U.S. concern for peace and an end to the fighting, we visited two Croatian cities under intense military siege.

At Osijek, we met with Dr. Zlatko Kramaric, President of the city. We were briefed by the President, held an impromptu press conference with reporters from the Associated Press, Reuters, and The Los Angeles Times, as well as journalists from Croatian print and broadcast media. We visited injured civilians and Croatian soldiers in the city's general hospital and heard several testimonies of brutality by chetniks, Serbian "terrorists," and Yugoslav soldiers. A fresh reminder of the horror of war greeted us as we walked out the door: a badly wounded Croatian soldier was rushed by us on a stretcher having just suffered his wounds at Vukovar -- our next stop.

Surrounded by more than 200 Yugoslav army tanks and a combination of "irregular" Serbian infantry and regular army troops, Vukovar is a city that has suffered much, especially since a stepped up offensive by the Serbs that began on or about August 25th.

Owing to the fact that every road to Vukovar is sealed off and possibly mined by Serbian "irregulars" and the Yugoslav army, we gained access to this border city via a small path through a cornfield.

Once inside the largely evacuated city, we witnessed dozens of buildings including homes that had been pulverized, we were told, by hostile mortar fire and Yugoslav MiG fighter jets.

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Accompanied by a small number of Croatian special forces we walked several blocks through the city clinging closely to buildings so as to avoid becoming an easy target. In open areas we jogged or ran to mitigate the danger of being fired upon. We were advised that several people had been shot by Serbian sniper teams that slipped into the city under the cover of night. According to Marin Vidic, the city official who escorted us, approximately 20 people were killed and approximately 80 wounded in various types of attacks in the days immediately preceding our visit.

Mr. Vidic also told us that many residents still in Vukovar were either too stubborn or too frightened to evacuate and were spending much time in underground cellars or makeshift bomb shelters.

One shelter we visited in the city -- an old wine cellar cut in the ridge of a small hill -- housed between 150-170 city residents. One man said that the people in the shelter hadn't ventured out of the cave-like refuge since Sunday, August 25. The agony and fear of bombardment and sniper fire was etched on the faces of several of the men, women and children.

Our delegation, then proceeded to walk to St. Phillip's Catholic Church, an historic church that had taken some hits either from MiG bombing raids or mortar fire. While we walked outside the Church, two Yugoslavian MiG fighters made two passes overhead. I photographed one of the fighters just before being herded by the special forces into the church for cover. After the MiGs passed overhead, without incident, we heard, in the distance, two explosions, but we could not confirm the source of the noise.

Our delegation was inspired by the obvious courage and commitment of Fr. Branimir Kosec, OFM, who along with the other priests and nuns of the parish had decided to stay in Vukovar to aid the people. In answer to a comment concerning his courage, Fr. Kosec simply said his courage is from God.

In Vukovar, the Croatian army leadership was anxious that we see a number of bomb fragments and debris, that they claim were cluster bombs. Both Mr. Wolf and I took several photographs of the bomb remnants and are sending them to appropriate U.S. government agencies for analysis.

Confronted with our observations in Vukovar, two days later, Yugoslav Vice Minister of Defense, Admiral Brovet told us the MiGs were "not" dropping ordinance on Vukovar.

SERBIA

On Monday, September 2, our delegation, joined by U.S. Ambassador Zimmerman met with Serbian President Slobodan Milosevic and Foreign Minister Jovanovic.

Our meeting with the Serbian President came on the heels of Milosevic's agreement to a cease-fire and to a conference under international auspices. While we commended the President for signing the agreement, we frankly stressed that, in our view, he bore a significant responsibility for the military offensive thus far and the future of the fragile peace.

In a very firm but diplomatic way we conveyed our concern over the potential for a blood bath and that Serbia and the Yugoslavian armed forces would bear the brunt of international criticism. One consequence of initiating new hostilities would be Serbian isolation, we told him.

The President spent much of his time describing what he perceived as the mistreatment of the 600,000 Serbs living in Croatia and the fear in Serbia that Croatia was evolving in a way not unlike it had 50 years ago when it allied itself to Nazi Germany. He spoke much of the atrocities committed by Croats against Serbs during that dark period and it was clear to me that past horrors are being employed as a rationale for current policies.

While fear of past Croatian genocidal behavior appears to be unwarranted in the current situation, it was, nevertheless, a dominant feature in our talks with the President and every other Serb leader. We had a rich exchange with Patriarch Pavle, head of the Serbian Orthodox Church and the Orthodox Metropolitan of Zagreb.

The Patriarch said the clergy was admonishing the faithful to pray for peace and reconciliation. The Metropolitan, however, was much more cynical suggesting that Serbs could forgive the Nazi area atrocities, but not forget. He said he "feared" for his own life in Zagreb.

Our delegation suggested that the Patriarch and the Cardinal consider a dramatic, highly visible joint appearance, or series of appearances to urge their respective flocks to pray and fast for peace, reconciliation and forgiveness. We suggested that this appeal might help break the cycle of hate and revenge which is on the verge of careening out of control. While we didn't get an immediate answer from the Patriarch to this suggestion, we intend to pursue this idea.

Our meeting with Admiral Stavil Brovet, Vice Minister of Defense, provided insights into the Yugoslav army position -- or at least his personal opinion. He said that the Yugoslavian army was in the uncomfortable role of separating the two sides. He said the MiGs over

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Vukovar hadn't dropped any bombs. We told him that the clear perception among many EC diplomats and others was that the Army had sided with the Serbians, a view he rejected by explaining, in part, how the command structure works.

We met with Budimir Loncar, Foreign Minister of the federal government, whose staff made a special point of expressing their gratitude for our trip. According to Mr. Loncar, active participation by the international community is a prerequisite for peace and a resolution to the many vexing problems Yugoslavia is experiencing. Our argument that Serbia in particular would likely be isolated if they initiated new and expanded hostilities didn't go unnoticed. Much of the discussion was focussed on financial aid and access to credit which he considers crucial to economic reform and progress.

Other meetings in Belgrade included a dialogue with four intellectuals from the Serbian Academy of Sciences and a talk with Tanja Petovar, cofounder of Helsinki International, Yugoslavia's affiliate, who gave a very negative assessment of President Miloslovic.

On behalf of our delegation, we look forward to meeting with you very soon.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Chris", written in a cursive style.

CHRISTOPHER H. SMITH
Member of Congress