

Serbia on spring offensive; U.S. intervention long overdue

by Dean Andromidas and Michael Liebig

Serbian forces launched a general offensive in eastern Bosnia and against encircled Sarajevo at the end of March. Simultaneously, Serbian forces resumed the artillery shelling of the Croatian towns of Zadar, Sibenik, and Dubrovnik, and are conducting guerrilla war-like, nighttime intrusions into Croatian territory in eastern Slavonia.

The Serbian offensive is correlated to a gradually changing American attitude toward Serbia. Even though a U.N. Security Council decision on the military enforcement of the air exclusion zone over Bosnia has been repeatedly postponed by the intrigues of Russia, Britain, and the U.N. bureaucracy, it is likely to materialize in April. In addition, although Bosnian President Alija Izetbegovic has been forced to sign the infamous Vance-Owen plan, in practical terms, the cynical Vance-Owen diplomacy at U.N. headquarters in New York is likely to collapse soon. The Serbian command is simply not content with having grabbed two-thirds of Bosnia; they are determined to take more for Greater Serbia.

The eastern Bosnian massacre

The Serbian offensive aims to liquidate the last pockets of Muslim resistance in eastern Bosnia, especially Srebrenica, Tuzla, and the Gradacac/Save Valley region. Even French U.N. commander Gen. Philippe Morillon, a cynic known for his pro-Serbian "neutrality," describes the conditions in Srebrenica (mass starvation and death) as "hell on earth." The Serbian command wants to kill as many of the 60,000 Muslim Bosnians in Srebrenica as possible through hunger, disease, and artillery bombardment.

In April 1992, there were 2.5 million Bosnian Muslims; now only 800,000 remain in Bosnia. Two-thirds of the Muslim population are now either refugees or dead. Tadeusz Mazowiecki, the special U.N. investigator, called the bloody Serbian siege of Srebrenica "another example of ethnic cleansing." The town had not received any outside food supplies for months: Since early March, Srebrenica has gotten only one U.N. truck convoy of food, supplemented only by U.S. food airdrops averaging 25 tons of food a day. General Morillon's minuscule relief efforts for Srebrenica collapsed on March 25, when Serbs fired at French and British U.N. helicopters trying to fly out severely wounded. Morillon's deputy, British Brigadier Cordy-Simpson, was forced to say: "This is the ultimate in despicable behavior."

The Serbian command is preparing to unleash on the

encircled town of Tuzla what they have done to Srebrenica. Tuzla is the headquarters of much of the Bosnian government, and it is the only bastion from which the government could reconquer the national territory. Reliable sources have indicated that the Serbian positions around Tuzla are being steadily reinforced and that two mixed brigades of Serbs and Russian "volunteers" are now deployed in the Tuzla region.

Renewed assault against Sarajevo

While the international public is slowly realizing the unspeakable extent of mass deaths in eastern Bosnia, the Serbian command has launched a parallel offensive against besieged Sarajevo. Since the second week of March, the artillery bombardment of Sarajevo has escalated massively, with an average of 2-3,000 shells a day raining down on the city and its suburbs. Since March 19, artillery fire has been so intense and so close to the Sarajevo airport that all U.N. relief flights have been suspended. On that day, Serbian forces directed anti-aircraft fire against a landing C-130 U.N. transport aircraft just before touchdown. The plane barely escaped being hit.

On March 17, the authors saw how Serbian forces behave toward the U.N. airlift. We flew as press observers on a U.S. Air Force C-130 Hercules transport aircraft flying two cargoes of 10 tons of wheat flour into Sarajevo that day. During the steep approach into the airport, we could see heavy artillery hits in the vicinity of the airport, with typical whitish and dark detonation smoke visible. Several buildings within a few hundred meters of the airport perimeter were on fire, and some mortar and artillery shells fell within less than 500 meters from the landing strip. When our plane had descended to an altitude of approximately 100 meters just before touchdown, Serb gunners just outside the airport perimeter opened fire with 20 mm anti-aircraft with tracers into the air parallel to the landing aircraft, clearly meaning to show the pilots that their "safety" was at the gunners' discretion. The airport was on what the U.N. terms "yellow" alert that day.

The Serbian forces are once more concentrating their attacks on the western suburbs of Sarajevo, the area around the airport, and the airport itself, in order to cut Sarajevo's food supplies. The winter cold is lessening, but the Serbs are now attempting to starve the city, to break morale at the center of Muslim-Bosnian resistance.

The threat to western aircraft

The March 17 flight was the 12th mission into Sarajevo by our air crew, which was comprised of Air Force Reserve officers doing their three to four weeks of duty. Although officially under orders, these officers and men in practice could be considered volunteers. They handled the flight into Sarajevo with professional skill. On the ground in Sarajevo, the cargo of food was unloaded in approximately five minutes. Our flight was typical of the missions two or three U.S. aircraft have been making twice daily since late summer 1992. The flight started from Frankfurt's Rhine-Main Air Base and went first to Split on Croatia's Dalmatian coast. There it picked up the U.N. food cargo. Flying time to Split was less than two hours, and from Split to Sarajevo another 45 minutes. Both shuttle runs of our aircraft were delayed up to two hours because the Sarajevo airport was closed twice due to heavy shelling. Flights to Sarajevo are considered by the U.S. Air Force as "hazardous duty," one step below combat duty. There are no fighter escorts and the planes' only "armament" are decoy flares which one hopes will ward off anti-aircraft missiles.

To date, Serbian forces have shot down a European Community-U.N. helicopter, killing four on board, and an Italian G-222 transport aircraft en route to Sarajevo, killing five. A German C-160 transport aircraft going to Sarajevo was badly damaged by Serbian anti-aircraft fire but managed to land safely with one loadmaster severely wounded. Unfortunately, it must be assumed that more aircraft on relief flights will be lost in the near future. The outrageous policy of inaction against Serbian aggression by the West and the U.N. bureaucracy tolerates monstrous crimes including mass slaughter, rape, and "ethnic cleansing" in Croatia and Bosnia. Increasingly, U.N. policy is putting the air and ground military forces carrying out humanitarian missions at deadly risk at the hands of Serbian forces. The soldiers are condemned to passivity, not allowed any effective means to defend themselves against Serbian attacks. The Serbian threat to western aircraft flying relief missions as well as to U.N. ground forces is likely to dramatically increase in the near future. The Serbians are likely to use covert, guerrilla-style methods on the ground. The Serbs consistently, blatantly deny any responsibility for their attacks on aircraft.

Despite the hesitancy, vagueness, and ambiguity of the Clinton administration's policy toward former Yugoslavia, the Serbian military and political command is deeply suspicious of, if not hostile to, the new administration. They view the U.S. airdrop over eastern Bosnia as a first step leading, via the military enforcement of the air exclusion zone over Bosnia, to a larger U.S. military intervention against Serbia. The Serb leadership also fears that, sooner rather than later, the U.S. will agree to lift the arms embargo against Bosnia and Croatia. Alekse Buha, a close associate of Serbian leader and war criminal Radovan Karadzic, said that the air exclusion zone "smells like Desert Storm." The Serbian command knows that in the next weeks, world public opinion will be



Co-author Michael Liebig at the airport in Split, Croatia. The authors recently flew as press observers on a U.S. Air Force C-130 Hercules transport plane, bringing flour into Sarajevo.

confronted with new, monstrous Serbian atrocities in eastern Bosnia, which will increase the pressure for U.S. military action.

It seems that the Serbian command has realized that the Vance-Owen diplomacy, which has provided the diplomatic cover for Serbia's war of aggression for so long, is fading away. On March 22, Buha said that the Vance-Owen plan was "wrong from the conception and condemned to fail. . . . Eastern Bosnia is Serbian. . . . The fragmented map designed by Mr. Vance and Lord Owen is an unacceptable geographical joke."

The Serbian spring offensive makes clear the urgent necessity for a determined U.S. and European military action against Serbia, whose political and military command is getting more arrogant and brutal by the day. Serbia is not going to show gratitude to western states that have tolerated and even encouraged its war of aggression for so long. In a widely circulated statement, Gen. Paul Abert Scherer (ret.), former head of German Military Intelligence, declared on March 10 that a U.S. intervention against Serbia is long overdue. The United States must conduct its intervention on the basis of applying force against the Serbian aggressor state. While opposing any commitment of ground forces, the United States and NATO must seize air superiority over the entire combat area. This must include the deployment of liaison officers along with Croatian and Bosnian forces on all fighting fronts, to direct air strikes on Serbian positions when required. Relief supplies must be delivered from airfields safe from Serbian attack. Any alternative approach would make the western forces, on the ground and in the air, hostage to Serbian forces.