

Balkan war on verge of shift as Sir Michael Rose departs

by Michael Liebig

The Jan. 25 departure of the British Unprofor Commander Sir Michael Rose will most likely usher in a new phase in the war in the Balkans. The "political general" Rose had always been a willing instrument of the London Foreign Office. Over the past year, he and the Foreign Office used every means at their disposal to consolidate the Serbian gains in Bosnia and Croatia. Aside from tactical concessions, the governments of Bosnia-Herzegovina, Croatia, the United States, and Germany were to be forced to essentially accept the Serb conquests. Then, with France and Russia's backing, the reality brought about by this war of aggression was to be officially recognized as "Greater Serbia."

With this strategic objective in mind, since 1991 London has been staging a truly unbelievable diplomacy of lies and deception in respect to the war in Bosnia-Herzegovina (and in Croatia): In assembly-line fashion, the Serbs were presented with ostensible "resolutions," "ultimatums," "last chances," and "threats," not a single one of which was meant to be taken seriously. It was claimed that it was forbidden to ship the Serbs supplies in Serb-occupied Bosnia, even though the opposite was the case. Rose announced dozens of "cease-fires" to the world press, all the while knowing that the Serbian side never even dreamed of honoring them. And during the Serbian military operations in Bosnia—in Bihac, for example—everything was done to avoid halting or hobbling their offensive. Here again, General Rose excelled. During the Serbian offensive against Bihac, London attempted to drum it into the heads of the Clinton administration, the Germans, and the world public, that the Bosnian government had "finally lost the war" and would have to "reconcile themselves to defeat." The Bosnian government, London said, would have to accept the splitting up of the country on the basis of the "military realities" created by the Serbs, and thus

would have to accept its own liquidation as a sovereign state.

Yet the Bosnian government did not capitulate. Despite the arms embargo which the British had been vigorously enforcing, the strength of the Bosnian army grew day by day. Financial resources, arms, and materiel flowed into Bosnia, despite the official embargo, such that it is expected that by this spring, the Bosnian army's pressure against the Serbs will significantly increase along the entire 2,000-kilometer front. In 1995, it is going to become increasingly harder for the Serbs to hold onto the fruits of their aggression.

Unprofor withdrawal seems certain

This seems to be the background of the increasing likelihood that the Unprofor forces will pull out. NATO preparations for a Unprofor evacuation are already fully under way. General Smith, Rose's British successor, and the new French Unprofor commander, are "military pragmatists," whose previous careers have focused on military operations. It may well be that in order to save face, the British will use the unilateral lifting of the arms embargo by the United States, as an excuse to withdraw, but whatever the excuse turns out to be, Unprofor's exit seems to be only a matter of time.

Internationally, the British government seems to have realized that the U.S. government's patience with British Balkan policy has run out. In early 1994, the Clinton administration intervened to end the fratricidal warfare of Muslim against Croat. Last autumn, the United States ended its collaboration with Great Britain on Balkans-related intelligence matters. In the U.S. Congress, a non-partisan majority voted for lifting the arms embargo and withdrawing Unprofor from Bosnia. This American attitude, of course, also colors the position taken by Germany. Plus, the British government can no longer count on being able to play the "Russian card."

Russia, which has been backing Serbia and thus has played along with London and Paris, is plunged into its own escalating, life-and-death crisis, and has a dwindling capacity to act with force in the Balkans.

One must also expect that when and if the Unprofor withdrawal begins, it will be assisted by German military units acting as part of NATO, and that German soldiers will become easy targets for Serbian military actions. London's Balkans policy since 1989, has indeed been aimed at setting up a Greater Serbia as a geopolitical counterbalance in southern Europe, against Germany in the north. London will therefore doubtless attempt to destabilize Germany by using any possible losses among the German soldiers involved in the withdrawal operation. This reminds one of the "friendship between men and soldiers," which unites General Rose with the Serbian General Mladic.

Tudjman's game with Milosevic

In early January, Croatian President Franjo Tudjman decided to demand the withdrawal of the Unprofor troops stationed in Croatia. This decision was most likely based on the fact that Tudjman knows that a pullout from Bosnia could be more or less combined with such a pullout from Croatia. Now Tudjman is attempting to use sheer rhetoric and propaganda to characterize this withdrawal as the product of his "responsible national policy," so that he can gain political ground domestically.

On all sides the fear is being voiced that the Unprofor withdrawal from Croatia would conjure up the risk of a new war between Serbia and Croatia. That is assuredly not Tudjman's design. In November-December 1994 he allowed the Serbian units to be almost completely redeployed from the occupied regions of Croatia, in order to assault Bihac in Bosnia. At that time, it would have been possible to take back the occupied Croatian regions militarily without major casualties and thus to give a real backup to the Bosnia Army in Bihac. Nothing of the kind occurred. The Croatian combat forces were condemned to stand still, while President Tudjman traveled to South America.

Tudjman also did everything so that in Bosnia, no effective military cooperation came about between the government army and the Croatian-Bosnian units. Hinting at alleged "Muslim fundamentalist" tendencies, Tudjman also torpedoed the political fulfillment of the "Washington Accords" between Muslims and Croats in Bosnia, and blocked cooperation between Croatia and Bosnia-Herzegovina.

Tudjman's main strategic goal is to come to terms with the Belgrade dictator Slobodan Milosevic. In such a "deal," Tudjman appears ready to write off part of the occupied Croatian national territory. In "return," other occupied areas in West Slavonia, Central Croatia, and Dalmatia would return to Croatian control. Tudjman floats the "normalization" of Croatian-Serbian relations as the basis for such an arrangement. He speaks about seeking a "Scandinavianization" of ex-Yugoslavia, and seems to think that the crisis in Russia as

well as the Unprofor pullout would move Belgrade to do business with him. Such a "deal" between Milosevic and Tudjman would include also, the partition of Bosnia-Herzegovina. Tudjman endorsed the Washington Accords only very unwillingly and under massive American pressure, and, as noted above, has thus far blocked their implementation. He would not hesitate to stab the Bosnia government in Sarajevo in the back. Obviously Bosnia knows that the "quiet diplomacy" between Zagreb and Belgrade is racing ahead full-speed. Croatian-Muslim tensions have correspondingly increased. It is not ruled out that certain groups in Sarajevo are trying to make their own arrangements with Milosevic; of course, the outlook for this is not very promising.

Croatian internal policy

Inside Croatia, Tudjman is coming under growing pressure. Economic conditions are worse and worse, as signaled by the recent strike wave, and, due to International Monetary Fund conditionalities' effects on Croatian economic and social policy, will keep declining.

Political dissatisfaction is also rising. With the occupation tightening its hold over one-third of Croatia and with 100,000 refugees, political and economic "normalization" is impossible. The Catholic Church, Croatia's most important institution, has long "actively tolerated" the Tudjman regime, but this could change. Already in 1994 there was growing unrest inside Tudjman's HDZ party and important fissures, which Tudjman was able to damp up.

Patience within the Croatian armed forces is also not unlimited. Outwardly the armed forces still appear calm, but the ever-sharpening attacks by high-ranking ex-military men on Tudjman's policies reflect the army's actual political mood. Especially of interest are the military policy analyses of former Defense Minister Martin Spigelj, a key initiator of the Bosnia-Croatian alliance: Only the political and military importance of this alliance, not diplomatic maneuvers and logrolling, can force the Milosevic regime and its stooges in Bosnia and Croatia to give up. Similar positions are advanced by Gens. Gorinsek and Jelic—to whom, together with Spigelj, Croatia owes its independence in 1991.

The Libertas movement, led by former Foreign Minister Zvonimir Separovic, is at the center of Croatia's political opposition. The pressure from the opposition is driving Tudjman into an increasing posture of nervous irritability, symptomized by the attempt to expand his already broad control over the media. Threats and intimidations are stepping up against the opposition. Typical is the attempt on Srecko Jurdana, Croatia's leading strategic analyst, who recently was branded as an "enemy of the state" and a "traitor," because he dares to reveal the dark background of the Tudjman regime's policy. Hence, it cannot be excluded that an Unprofor withdrawal from Bosnia and Croatia will make Tudjman's role shaky indeed. His position "fit" into the overall constellation during the past four years in former Yugoslavia. With a new overall situation, that could change.