

## **New Hopes for Peace in the Balkans**

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Recent progress in efforts to achieve a political settlement in Bosnia-Herzegovina and the new cease-fire there are cause for cautious optimism. While much remains to be settled, the long-suffering people of the former Yugoslavia have at least a glimmer of hope that their agony is almost over. The Clinton administration is to be commended for giving this matter the priority it deserves in recent months.

The latest developments will lead to a just and lasting peace only if progress is made in a number of areas.

Human rights abuses. Much work will have to be done to ensure that the human rights of all persons, especially minorities, are fully respected. More assertive efforts must be made to stop the on-going "ethnic cleansing" of Muslims and Croats in the Banja Luka area before the entire non-Serb population is forced out. In Krajina, the failure of the Croatian government to prevent the reportedly widespread burning and looting of Serb homes and violence against Serb civilians is most disturbing. A Croatia that has reintegrated its territory but not the Serbs who have lived there for centuries lacks a firm basis for peace.

Rebuilding multi-ethnic, multi-religious democracies. A just and lasting peace in the region cannot be built on the division of Bosnia along ethnic and religious lines or the creation of ethnically and religiously homogenous states in the region. As difficult as it is to overcome the divisions created by four years of war, the goal of multi-ethnic, multi-religious societies should not be abandoned; the alternative is long-term instability and injustice.

The right of return. A precondition for achieving this goal is protecting the right of displaced Serbs, Croats and Muslims to return to their homes in safety, confident that their equal rights within a multi-ethnic, multi-religious society will be protected. Without a right of return, prospects for tolerance and democracy in the region will be endangered.

Enforcement of a political settlement. The U.S. Bishops have long supported the enforcement of a just peace settlement by the international community, including the participation of U.S. troops if necessary. The use of U.S. and other foreign troops to enforce a settlement entails serious risks, but these risks seem to be justified by the

interest of the U.S. and the international community in bringing about a lasting settlement to this conflict.

Support for reconstruction and reconciliation. If these war-torn countries are to be rebuilt, the United States and the international community will have to provide substantial support. We will continue to work with the Roman Catholic Church and other religious leaders in the region to help them play their critical role of encouraging long-term reconciliation between their divided peoples.

Support for the war crimes tribunal. The continued support of the United States and the international community for the war crimes tribunal is important if individual perpetrators of crimes are to be brought to justice and to uphold international law. Just as important, it can counter temptations to vengeance and thereby contribute to a climate of reconciliation.

Clearly, the consequences of the terrible war that has been raging for four years in the Balkans will not easily be overcome. Our Christian faith gives us hope that with adequate support from the international community, the peoples of the Balkans will succeed in breaking historic cycles of violence and injustice, and, as divided as they are now, come once again to live together in peace.