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Kosovo (Commentary)  
KOSOVO -- WHAT WENT WRONG?

By: R. Ravichandran

KUALA LUMPUR, April 7 (Bernama) -- After more than two weeks of Nato's air strikes against Yugoslavia, the alliance seems farther than when it started in putting a stop to the on-going brutal killings of the Kosovan ethnic Albanians.

While the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation was left with no other choice, after having failed to force Belgrade to accept the Rambouillet peace agreement, nevertheless questions remain to be answered as to why it took so long for Nato to take action, despite the ethnic cleansing campaign started some one year ago.

It was in March last year that Yugoslav President Slobodan Milosevic sent its police and military units to brutally suppress the Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA) which was fighting for a complete independence for Kosovo.

Since then, more than 2,000 people are believed to have been killed.

Despite repeated appeals and concerns showed by many countries, including Malaysia for Western countries to protect the ethnic Albanians, the alliance opted for political solutions, which were something people like Milosevic would not accept, given his past track record in the Bosnian conflict.

Exactly one year ago, Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad warned the world that the continued aggressiveness and belligerence of the Serbian leadership would lead to a "colossal catastrophe" in Kosovo and the whole of the Balkans.

"It would be a shame if the world allows the situation in Kosovo to deteriorate further until it becomes another Bosnia-Herzegovina," he said then.

At that time, Malaysia for its part had organised a forum on Kosovo to send a message to the people of Kosovo that Malaysians were concerned and in support of their aspirations for freedom.

Thus, it is not wrong to say that the western powers have failed in its appeasement policy towards Milosevic, and in fact they were partly to blame for giving much time for Milosevic to prepare his war machine for his Kosovo campaign.

By showing lack of urgency in dealing with the Kosovo problem from the beginning, the Western countries had indirectly rewarded a war criminal like Milosevic.

In fact the United States and its western allies were never able to come out with a clear policy in the Balkans, despite the lessons they learned from the Bosnia conflict.

In the Bosnian campaign which started in early 1990's, some two million people were displaced and 250,000 died.

In fact, Kosovo was the place where in 1987 Milosevic first launched his anti-Albanian campaign to capture the Serb support to finally become president two years later.

One of the first things he did after being in power was to tighten his control over Kosovo and eventually in 1989, he revoked the province's self-government status, in force since 1974.

Going back to recent history or even long before the Bosnian conflict which shaped a new order in Europe, Kosovo was always a "time bomb" in Europe, as for many decades there were seeds of discontent among Kosovan ethnic Albanians against the federal rule.

So it was only natural that Milosevic would use whatever measures to suppress the ethnic Albanians, after being humiliated in the Bosnian conflict, which led to Croatia, Macedonia, Slovenia and Bosnia-Herzegovina being wiped out from the Yugoslavian map.

The exodus of ethnic Albanians to neighbouring countries proves that Nato's objective of launching its "Operation Allied Force" on March 24 to prevent more human suffering, repression and violence against the civil population of Kosovo has backfired miserably, for the moment at least.

Now according to latest Nato figures, more than one million of Kosovo's two million people have fled the territory, with thousands more on their way to neighbouring countries under very harsh conditions.

The majority of ethnic Albanians, who make up 90 per cent of the two million population of Kosovo, are Muslims.

This catastrophe unprecedented since World War II, had not only triggered a major humanitarian problem, but further choked the already poor countries like Albanian and Macedonia.

Even the refugee crisis during the Vietnam War in the 1970's would pale in comparison.

Nato would have thought that it could wrap up the whole operations in a few days or at least could force Milosevic back to the negotiation table, as the operation was launched just 12 days before the 50th anniversary of the signing of the North Atlantic Treaty (April 4).

In Nato's view, the timing of the operation could surely provide it with an opportunity to impress upon its new members, Poland, Hungary and the Czech Republic, that their recent entry was not a wrong move, and that if Nato is willing to protect people of a non-member country, what about if its own members are threatened.

There are other misjudgments on Nato's part. The alliance was so over-confident of its ability and capability to complete the whole operations in a shorter period of time, without anticipating that Milosevic would resort to large-scale ethnic cleansing.

Even the political scenario has changed with Russia's condemnation of the attack, and other actions, including the sending of the first of several Russian warships to the Mediterranean to spy on Nato forces involved in strikes against Yugoslavia, all reminiscent of the Cold War era.

Nato is now getting more desperate, as it had started to strike civilian facilities like bridges and roads right into Belgrade itself without regard to civilian casualties, showing that it did not have a clear strategy on "how and at what point" to stop the conflict if Milosevic never wants peace.

Overall, the US and its allies' "politics of mass destruction" has not helped to stop the mass exodus from Kosovo, but rather gives an opportunity for the Serb regime to use the chaotic situation to run a systematic genocide campaign.

The world would not be surprised that Nato's inability to stop the exodus by stopping the Serb atrocities would only eventually result in Kosovo being liberated but without its people.

The whole situation has changed to the extent that some countries have called for additional elements in the Rambouillet accord, including the right of the refugees to return.

"For instance, in the Rambouillet accord, there is nothing about a return of refugees. We will have to include something about the right of the refugees to return, and how that should be organised," French Foreign Minister Hubert Vedrine said on Sunday.

This exposes very much the weaknesses of the Western countries which initiated the accord, as they did not anticipate a large exodus of the

Kosovan population.

History shows that refugees are more reluctant to go back to their home countries, fearing for their safety, what more under a regime headed by Milosevic.

And it would not be an easy task for the return and resettlement of these refugees as the Serbs are intensifying their "identity elimination" of Kosovars by destroying archives and documents like property deeds, marriage licences, birth certificates and financial records.

Given the US and Britain's dismal failure in their anti-Saddam campaign in Iraq for almost a decade, despite so many covert and overt operations, it would not be an easy task to eliminate someone like Milosevic, known as a master tactician and in the art of brinkmanship.

On the very military side, although Nato's strength was far more superior, Yugoslavia still possesses quite a formidable force, with some 1,000 surface-to-air missiles, about 2,000 anti-aircraft guns and 85 MiG fighters, and already one American F-117A Stealth fighter has been shot down.

With its combined 110,000 armed forces, backed by a paramilitary force of 60,000 as well as some 100,000 reservists, defence analysts say that it can sustain the war longer while unleashing its terror campaign in Kosovo.

Nato's reluctance to commit ground troops will only make it easier for Milosevic to achieve his ultimate agenda of chasing out the entire ethnic Albanian population - the only remaining major non-Serb ethnic in the country.

Analysts say that Western powers also need to map out a post-Kosovo strategy to manage Milosevic as if he still stays in power, the "Butcher of Balkans" is capable of doing more harm to any peace achieved in the region.

But in the meantime, in the closing months of this century, the world may well witness the "colossal catastrophe" in Kosovo and the whole of the Balkans that Dr Mahathir warned of only a year ago.

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