

The Washington Times, April 13, 2008



On Feb. 17, leaders of the ethnic Albanian community in the Serbian province of Kosovo and Metohia illegally and unilaterally declared independence from Serbia .

Violating Serbia 's territorial integrity and international law, the United States and some European countries extended recognition and demanded that the Serbian government and Serbs in Kosovo respect the "border" created through our territory. They further insist on acceptance of the illegitimate "authority" in Pristina and deployment of a European Union mission ("EULEX"), despite absence of any legal ground, including United Nations Security Council authorization.

These actions are clear violations of the controlling U.N. Security Council Resolution 1244 (1999), which affirms Serbian sovereignty in the province. They also already have resulted in violence. The willingness of Washington and its hangers-on to use force to impose their demands was displayed recently in the mainly Serbian area of Northern Mitrovica, where U.N. police (UNMIK) and NATO-led military (KFOR) took violent action against Serbian judges and court workers who had peacefully and temporarily held a sit-in in a court building where they been employed prior to the 1999 NATO war against my country. This was done despite an agreement, which I brokered, for the Serbs to leave the premises voluntarily, which they were doing when they were violently attacked.

My government has demanded an impartial international investigation. President Bush's recent decision to provide weapons and other military assistance to the Albanian separatists points to further violent suppression of Serbs in Kosovo.

Serbia has responded to these provocations with restraint and constructive initiatives to restore peace and the rule of law. Recently I proposed that — pursuant to Resolution 1244 — the Serbian community would govern its own affairs, under U.N. oversight and jurisdiction. This would effectively protect the Serbian community from the lawlessness of the ethnic Albanian "government" headed by commanders of the so-called "Kosovo Liberation Army."

It also would allow the United Nations to help restore the rule of law, gravely compromised and critically endangered by the illegal unilateral proclamation of secession from Serbia. The proposal by Serbia makes it clear we are upholding Resolution 1244 and volunteering to help the U.N. maintain the Resolution's integrity, with cooperation of Serbs in Kosovo. The United Nations' acceptance or rejection of this offer will be a real test of whether they intend to maintain their valid role in Kosovo under Resolution 1244.

True to form, some observers have denounced our proposal as an attempt to "partition" Kosovo, or to have Serbs "secede." Such accusations are knowing and malicious falsehoods. It is patently obvious to any fair-minded observer that we seek not partition or secession but maintaining the integrity of Resolution 1244 where possible (the areas where Serbs live) as opposed to the Albanian-dominated areas, where the U.N.'s authority under Resolution 1244 has been negated by the separatist declaration of Feb. 17, the illegal deployment of EULEX, and null and void foreign recognitions.

Any suggestion of partitioning Kosovo — which would be a "partition within a partition" of Serbia's sovereign territory — contradicts every argument Serbia has made. We consistently have rejected any attempt by any party to impose an illegal and forcible separation of any part of our country, however small.

Serbia will never accept an independent Kosovo, in whatever portion of the province it may consist. One must wonder if the real agenda of those talking about partition of Kosovo — and then blaming it on the Serbs — is further "Balkanization" in other regions of the world.

Despite brazen violation of international norms, Serbia still trusts in elementary standards of human decency, the rule of law, and world opinion, which remains on our side. Most countries have not followed the U.S. lead and continue to respect Serbia's position.

We remain ready to negotiate the broadest possible autonomy for Kosovo's Albanians, greater than that afforded any national or religious minority elsewhere in the world. But we will not be dictated to by anyone. We are willing to give the foreign governments that have been so hostile to us a chance to take a step back from the volatile situation they have created and work with the Serbian state and the Serbian people to restore peace and the rule of law, which they have so crudely damaged.

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