

Kosovo violence delays Serb-Albanian talks  
Victoria Stegic, *Agence Presse France*, 8/20/03

The latest ethnic violence in Kosovo, which has claimed the lives of three Serbs, has delayed plans for talks between Kosovo's Albanian authorities and the Serbian government. The talks were initially set for July and then for August. But Serbian Prime Minister Zoran Zivkovic has said the dialogue could not take place while ethnic Albanian "terrorists" were randomly killing Serb civilians. The Serbian government said on Monday there had been a "dramatic deterioration" in security in Kosovo and told a special sitting of the United Nations Security Council that urgent action must be taken to stem the violence, which it blamed on ethnic Albanians.

Kosovo technically remains a province of Serbia but it has been under UN administration since the end of the 1998-99 war between ethnic Albanian separatists and Serbian security forces. The Albanians, who make up the vast majority of Kosovo's 1.8 million people, are demanding independence but Serbia refuses to consider anything more than maximum autonomy. The proposed dialogue, which would be the first since the end of the war, would only deal with practical issues such as electricity supplies and the return of Serb refugees and would not touch on the independence question.

Military analyst Zoran Dragisic said the planned talks were the root cause of the renewed ethnic tension. Kosovar Albanians were divided over the talks, he said, and the escalating violence showed that the "maximalist aspirations" of separatist Albanians were not being realised. Two Serb youths were gunned down while swimming in a river in western Kosovo on August 13, in what was feared to be a hate crime. A third Serb died in hospital last week after a separate attack. Thousands of Serbs took to the streets of Kosovo after the killing of the two youths to demand an end to ethnic violence and the Serbian government laid the blame squarely on the Albanians.

Serbian Deputy Prime Minister Nebojsa Covic urged the international community on Tuesday to recognise Albanian violence against Serbs as "terrorism". "We all must recognise, without any prejudice and fear, that the actions of Albanian extremist and terrorist groups represent the main threat to the stabilisation of Kosovo and Metohia and the region as a whole," he said in an address to the Security Council. The recent violence, particularly the cold-blooded shooting of the two Serb youths, belonged to a "pattern of activity by a determined minority of the Albanian population", he said.

Extremist Albanian nationalists were using violence to intimidate the UN mission in Kosovo and NATO peacekeepers, and to complete the "ethnic cleansing" of the province by driving the remaining 80,000 Serbs out, he added. Covic said 1,021 Serbs had been killed and 52 "sacred Christian relics", including 10 monasteries and churches dating back as far as the 14th century, had been demolished since the arrival of NATO peacekeepers.

Covic outlined a 14-point plan to rectify the situation, including a massive programme to disarm the population and increased NATO patrols. He also called for the abolition of the UN-backed Kosovo Protection Corps of former ethnic Albanian rebel fighters, which allegedly supported a known "terrorist" group called the Albanian National Army. Several Security Council members

condemned the recent attacks. But some, particularly Britain and the United States, rejected Covic's demand that they be termed "terrorist" actions, Tanjug news agency reported.

Kosovo Prime Minister Bajram Rexhepi, an ethnic Albanian, has condemned the latest attacks as "monstrous". But he complained on Tuesday that the absence of Kosovar Albanian representatives at the Security Council discussions was a "handicap". "The Kosovar stitutions are working to create a security environment that is equal for everyone who lives in Kosovo," he told reporters.