

Helsinki Commission Hearing:
Bosnia-Herzegovina: Outstanding Issues in Post-Conflict Recovery and Reconciliation
Thursday, November 8, 2007
Statement of Representative Alcee L. Hastings, Chairman

Today's Helsinki Commission hearing focuses on the current situation in Bosnia, and what needs to be done to help that country move forward with the reforms necessary for European integration.

Of course, to the extent the Balkans is the focus of attention today, that focus is squarely on determining the status of Kosovo. That is, indeed, a major issue and, if handled incorrectly, could lead to further instability in the region.

We cannot, however, neglect what seems to be a growing political crisis in Bosnia. The international community, including the United States, has invested considerable time and resources in the 10 to 15 years -- including troops, diplomatic personnel and financial assistance -- to end the violence in Bosnia and rebuild a country devastated by conflict. It would be a serious error if this international effort were allowed to fail.

We also owe it to the people of Bosnia to encourage them to move forward. Yes, many of Bosnia's politicians can be blamed for the failure to achieve progress, but those politicians are in power at least in part because the wounds of the conflict have not been sufficiently healed. Persons indicted for terrible crimes continue to evade justice. Mass graves continue to be found. The remains of missing family members or loved ones continue to be identified.

It is difficult to exaggerate the true horror of the Bosnian conflict, with its many atrocities including the genocide at Srebrenica, and its impact on the people of the region. Yes, we want the people of Bosnia to look forward, and work toward achieving their country's integration in Europe. At the same time, it is too easy to tell them simply to forget the past, or to put it behind them. At best, they can only reckon with the past, and come to terms with what happened.

Having lived through the injustices of the segregated South here in the United States, I know how difficult it can be to move on when others refuse even to acknowledge the wrongs that were committed by them or in their name.

One defendant at the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia, during his sentencing hearing in which there was a plea agreement, is quoted as saying:

"In Bosnia, a neighbor means more than a relative. In Bosnia, having coffee with your neighbor is a ritual, and this is what we trampled on and forgot. We lost ourselves in hatred and brutality. And in this vortex of terrible misfortune and horror, the horror of Srebrenica happened. I will be happy if my testimony helps the families of the victims, if I can spare them having to testify again and relive the horrors and the pain during their testimony. It is my wish that my testimony should help prevent this ever happening again, not just in Bosnia, but anywhere in the world."

These sentiments need repeating, perhaps thousands of times and not just by those who committed the crimes but by those who at the time accepted or even supported what was being done in their name.

Our witnesses at today's hearing are unquestionably, if not uniquely, qualified to speak on these issues. Their biographies have been made available to the public and will be incorporated into the record, so I will not repeat them here.

I want to welcome Raffi Gregorian, the Principal Deputy High representative in Bosnia. Dr. Gregorian, we look forward to your comments at this critical time. I note that the State Department loaned Cliff Bond, the former U.S. Ambassador to Bosnia, to the Helsinki Commission as a senior advisor, and we loaned him back to help your office deal with issues relating to Srebrenica. I hope he is getting the support he needs for the valuable work he is doing. We miss his presence here but know he is needed there.

Next, I welcome Ambassador Douglas Davidson, Head of the OSCE Mission in Bosnia. Ambassador, in recent Commission hearings with the President of the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly and the OSCE Chairman-in-Office, there was great praise for the work of OSCE field missions. Your mission led the way in establishing a large presence on the ground, including outside the capital city, and providing substantial expertise in areas like elections. The Helsinki Commission is also a strong supporter of the missions, and we hope that they get the personnel and money they need to get the job done. We know this is a challenge today.

Adam Boys is the Chief Operating Officer for the International Commission for Missing Persons. Mr. Boys, helping people learn the fate of lost family members and loved ones must be one of the most emotionally draining activities to undertake in Bosnia, but I believe it can probably be the most rewarding as well. I congratulate you on the accomplishments of the ICMP and look forward to hearing how your work allows people to reckon with the past.

Finally, we have Diane Orentlicher of American University's Washington College of Law and the Open Society Justice Initiative, who is well known for her work on international law and human rights. How to provide a sense of justice is perhaps the most challenging of all tasks, especially in a place like Bosnia where the injustices were so great. And the challenge is not only to provide some satisfaction to the surviving victims, but also to deter prospective perpetrators of serious crimes that include genocide. It is a sad fact that these crimes were committed in a Europe which was finally whole and free with the conclusion of the Cold War, and equally sad that these crimes have also occurred elsewhere in the world since then, even today. I appreciate your advocacy of efforts which would make this world a much better place, and look forward to your views on the current situation in Bosnia.