

EC's Superpower Ambitions Jarred by Yugoslav Strife; Bosnian Republic Resembles Tinderbox Waiting to Explode as Crisis Widens: [FINAL Edition]

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The sun was just going down over the starkly beautiful mountains that rise up from Yugoslavia's Adriatic coastline when several dozen heavily armed men stepped out of the woods and waved their automatic rifles at the Bosnian government motorcade.

"Turn your engine off. Don't move," shouted the soldiers, Yugoslav army reservists from the neighboring republic of Montenegro, deployed into Bosnia three days ago over the strenuous protests of Bosnian authorities.

The Bosnian deputy prime minister and other members of a government commission sent to investigate the activities of the reservists were suddenly being held at gunpoint - along with half a dozen Yugoslav and foreign journalists who had come along as observers.

My driver, who had been assigned to protect me by the Bosnian interior minister, instinctively reached for his German-made pistol. But he quickly understood that the situation was hopeless.

"We didn't stand a chance. They all had automatics aimed at us. One shot and they would have killed the lot of us," he said later.

After a half-hour of tense negotiations among the deputy prime minister, the reservists and the commander of the local military garrison, we were released. But Sunday evening's incident was a dramatic illustration of the fact that the Yugoslav civil war, which until now has been confined to Croatia and Slovenia, is threatening to spill over into the central republic of Bosnia. With its diverse population - 43 percent Muslim, 31 percent Serbian and 17 percent Croatian - Bosnia is the proverbial Balkan tinderbox waiting to explode. A few shots fired by a young Serbian student in the Bosnian capital, Sarajevo, at the heir to the Austrian throne in June 1914 ignited World War I. Bosnia may no longer hold the strategic importance it once did for the Great Powers, but it could play a decisive role in the outcome of the present Yugoslav conflict.

"It would be a catastrophe if the war was extended here. There would be neither victors nor vanquished, only victims. Every second person in this republic has a weapon," said Bosnian President Alija Izetbegovic in an interview today in Sarajevo. "All of Yugoslavia would be drawn into the conflict. Muslims in Serbia would rise up. Europe would not be able to keep out of such a war."

Over the past few days, there have been mounting signs that Serbian leader Slobodan Milosevic would like to incorporate large chunks of Bosnia into a Greater Serbia or, alternatively, a shrunken Yugoslavia that would be dominated by the Serbs. Four Serbian-inhabited regions of Bosnia, covering roughly 60 percent of the total territory, have declared their autonomy and thousands of Serbian and Montenegrin reservists have entered the republic from several directions.

Bosnia's Muslim leaders have responded by mobilizing police reservists and establishing a crisis committee. But they acknowledge that the republic is incapable of defending itself from serious incursions by outside forces: its own police force includes many Serbs whose ultimate political loyalties lie with Serbia rather than Bosnia.

The most potent political weapon available to Bosnian leaders in this situation is making as much noise as possible in the hope of attracting international attention. "Milosevic is like Hitler. The world must understand what will happen if he is not stopped. He is a crazy man," said Deputy Prime Minister Rusmir Mahmutcehajic, as we drove through the magnificent Neretva valley, scene of epic battles in World War II between Marshal Tito's Communist partisans and the Germans, in search of 3,000 or so Montenegrin reservists.

The composition of the government commission was a case study in Bosnian coalition politics. Led by Mahmutcehajic, a Muslim, it also included a Serb and a Croat. Each had his own personal bodyguards, who eyed each other suspiciously. The Muslim and Croatian bodyguards were decked out in shiny suits and dark glasses, the Serbs in Rambo-style battle dress. All were armed to the teeth.

In between listening to news bulletins from the front, Mahmutcehajic speculated on the reasons for deploying the Montenegrin reservists into Hercegovina, as Bosnia's western region is known. Version one: to establish a buffer zone between Serbian and Croatian areas. Version two: to cut the medieval Adriatic city of Dubrovnik off from the rest of Croatia. Version three: to destabilize the socio-political situation in Bosnia-Hercegovina. Version four: to forestall an attack by Croats on the military airfield at Mostar. And so on.

As we drove on, we saw more armed men, representing a bewildering array of factions and paramilitary forces. Some saluted as we drove past. Others scowled. A few years ago, the Yugoslav People's Army was one of the largest and best-disciplined armies in Europe. Modeled on Tito's partisans, and based on the principles of territorial defense and the rapid mobilization of reservists, it was designed was to deter a foreign invasion. Today, this force is busy fighting other Yugoslavs.

The long motorcade of government BMWs, Opels and Mercedes pulled into a mixed Muslim and Croatian village. A crowd quickly gathered around us. "This is not a Yugoslav army - this is a Serbian army," shouted one villager. "They are behaving like beasts. They are drunkards," screamed another. "They were firing at us all night," yelled a third. "Give us weapons. Nobody is safe any longer," shouted a fourth.

"Weapons, weapons," the villagers chanted together, looking as tough and as rugged as the mountains that rose up around them.

As we toured more villages on the left bank of the Neretva river, the cause of the commotion became clearer. A long line of 150 trucks and tourist buses arrived here last Friday from Montenegro, disgorging some 3,000 disheveled reservists. Part of this ragtag army has been billeted in the military airfield, but others are camped out in the open. To pass the time, the reservists turn to local bars for women and drink and shoot their guns in the air.

"There have been some incidents of indiscipline," conceded Col. Milojko Pantelic, the commander of the Mostar garrison. "These men are not subject to my command. They do not obey me."

It is clear that inter-communal relations in Hercegovina, strained at the best of times, have sharply deteriorated since the arrival of the reservists. Muslims and Croats view the newcomers as a direct threat. Serbs see them as a potential ally in a future battle, even though they are careful not to show their satisfaction in public.

"We now look at each other much more suspiciously. There could be bloodshed at any moment," said Pero Markovic, the Croatian mayor of Chaplina, whose population includes around 1,100 Croats, 550 Muslims and 260 Serbs. He produced a 20mm mortar shell that he said had been fired at the village by the reservists the previous night.

After crisscrossing the Hercegovinian countryside, we eventually came across several dozen Montenegrin reservists lounging outside Slobo's Bar in the tiny village of Potkosa. The tables

were littered with empty beer bottles. The government ministers got out of their limousines. There was a clatter of safety catches being released and cartridge clips being jammed into position as two armed groups faced each other across the remote mountain road.

"Hi, guys. Can I speak to your host?" said Mahmutcehajic, introducing himself as the head of the government commission. No reply. The deputy prime minister retreated. "We are fulfilling our orders. We are here on a military exercise," volunteered one of the Montenegrins.

The motorcade moved off. Suddenly we heard a sound of shouting as the police escort practically ran into a barricade blocking the road, a half-mile up the hill from the bar. Excited-looking soldiers waving M-76 automatic sniper rifles and Kalashnikovs appeared out of the woods on one side of the road. A row of ruined houses on the other side of the road blocked any escape route. Each of the 20 or so cars in the motorcade was covered by an armed soldier.

It would have been illogical, we agreed later, for the reservists to have opened fire on several Bosnian government ministers, the local police chief and several foreign reporters. There would surely have been an international outcry. But that was little comfort at the time. In Yugoslavia these days, events have ceased to follow a strictly logical course.

After about 10 minutes, the deputy prime minister was allowed to leave his car and approach the command post on foot. Some 10 minutes later, an officer appeared and yelled at his men to get back in the woods. Eventually, we were ordered to turn round and return to Mostar.

Back in Sarajevo, the head of the Bosnian government's crisis committee accused Western countries of political myopia in refusing to get directly involved in the Yugoslav crisis. The West, said Ejup Ganic, should formally recognize the sovereignty of all Yugoslav republics including Bosnia-Herzegovina and send observers to monitor the frontiers.

"The army is out of control. It is behaving like a wounded bear that won't get back in its cage," said Ganic, a member of Bosnia's seven-man collective presidency.

At the headquarters of the pro-Milosevic Serbian Democratic party, officials welcomed the deployment of the federal army reservists into Bosnia as a "guarantee against civil war." Party leader Radovan Karadzic accused Bosnia's Muslim politicians of undermining Yugoslavia by forming an unholy alliance with Serbia's archenemy, Croatia.

"The Muslims are trying to dominate Bosnia. They want to create an Islamic state here, but we Serbs are not going to let them. You cannot force Christians to live in a Muslim state. Look what happened in Lebanon," said Karadzic.