

Pentagon says Bosnia must be rebuilt fast

by William Jones

EIR recently received an off-the-record briefing on the progress of implementation of the Dayton peace accords in Bosnia-Herzegovina from a Pentagon official. He paints the following picture: The first phase of Operation Joint Endeavor, the military operation to station U.S. and allied forces in Bosnia to ensure implementation of the accords, has proceeded relatively smoothly. The separation of forces, and the elimination of heavy weapons from the zones of separation, is proceeding pretty much without incident. But another danger is looming. The crux of the danger lies in how quickly the economic reconstruction of Bosnia will swing into operation. Pentagon sources confirm that the U.S. military is concerned with the snail's pace of the reconstruction effort.

Although reconstruction of Bosnia was a subsidiary part of the discussions in Dayton, it was clear that only if the devastated nation were quickly rebuilt, giving proof to all parties that peace could provide a definite improvement in their well-being, could a lasting settlement be established.

In many respects, the Implementation Force (IFOR) operations could provide the impetus to the needed civilian infrastructure investment. Much of what the Army Corps of Engineers must build in order to get the troops into place and to provide the logistics to keep them in operation, has a certain "dual-use" character. The bridge over the Sava River, for instance, provided the means for U.S. troops to set up their base in Tuzla. But it also provides a means for civilian transport. Historically, the Corps has accomplished much infrastructural development simply as an adjunct to its military mission. Much of the infrastructure of the United States was built with the help of the Corps, which still holds the main responsibility for maintaining the nation's waterways.

But times have changed. With the "free market" mania of the Conservative Revolution in the late 1980s and early '90s, anything seen as competing with "private enterprise" was forbidden. The debacle in Somalia has also made "nation-building" anathema. Wariness by Pentagon planners over "mission creep," i.e., expansion of tasks not originally defined, assures that the military will not deviate from their specific objectives.

In addition, budget cuts have taken their toll. "If it's a conflict between the engineering capabilities of the Army Corps and a new sophisticated weapons systems, we'll go for the weapons systems to assure that we can accomplish

our main mission, which is to defend the nation," one source said. While the Corps has thus been hog-tied and somewhat "greened," with their task being more conversation than construction, the civilian "economic reconstruction" has been effectively reduced to convincing private firms to set up shop in war-torn Bosnia, interspersed with promises of some multilateral aid. Another "donors' conference" has been set for early spring, but no one can say if investments will start flowing into the Bosnian economy. The donors' conference in December that pulled together some \$600 million in promised funds, has hardly made a dent.

The IMF obstacle

Whatever "multilateral aid" is forthcoming will come under the auspices of the International Monetary Fund and World Bank. Already, the IMF has decided that 17% of former Yugoslavia's foreign debt must be born by Bosnia. Faced with the need for immediate rebuilding after a destructive and genocidal war, the Bosnian government is now saddled with an additional debt burden which it did nothing to acquire! At a conference in Washington on Jan. 23, the chief of the Central Europe Department of the World Bank, Michel Noel, made it clear that debt arrears and making a deal with the Paris Club of debtors was "critical for Bosnia." For the World Bank and the IMF, the debt will take priority over reconstruction.

In addition to the mass movement of refugees within former Yugoslavia, there will soon be another 330,000 Bosnian refugees from Germany that the German government is intent on returning to Bosnia by August 1997. German Interior Minister Kanther has been saying that "economic reconstruction and sending back of refugees must be combined," but this is largely rhetoric.

If reconstruction occurs at a snail's pace, the peacemaking chores become nearly insuperable. In a tight labor market, the powers that control one area of the country will prioritize jobs for their own ethnic group, adding tensions and fears to those already created by a long and genocidal war. If new housing is not built and new jobs quickly created, the influx of refugees also becomes a potential element of destabilization.

The longer reconstruction is stalled, the more serious the situation becomes for the troops on the ground. When people who have greeted the troops as the harbingers of peace, begin to see economic conditions worsen, the "peacekeepers" will more and more be cast as an occupying force. The myriad of compromises that make up the Dayton accords are difficult enough to achieve under optimal conditions of recovery. If the reconstruction doesn't occur quickly, the troops are put at a far greater risk than when they were sent in. It behooves the Clinton administration and its allies in this effort, France and Germany, to take the decision-making out of the hands of the "free market" and the IMF, and put it into the hands of people who know what reconstruction is all about.