
Hasan Cengic

The priorities for Bosnia's armed forces

Bosnian Deputy Defense Minister Hasan Cengic and Defense Ministry press spokesman Faris Nanic received the Schiller Institute delegation on April 15. Mr. Cengic's remarks were translated by Mr. Nanic, and the text of the discussion published here has been abridged.

Cengic: I would like to take the opportunity to wish a pleasant stay in Sarajevo to all our distinguished guests. I am very glad to have the opportunity to receive you here. I am partly acquainted with the activities of the Schiller Institute, and also of the other guests, who are not members of the Schiller Institute, and I would like to thank you once again for everything that you have done so far for Bosnia. We hope that your activities will continue, despite the fact that, thank God, the war is over. But you certainly know that the cessation of war does not mean the cessation of problems. We have a saying here since the war: "During the war we had only one problem. After the war, now we have all the problems."

I would like to give you a short overview of the situation.

A historical perspective

I would not like to dwell on the past, not even the recent past. We really want to put this war behind us. But, I would like to tell you, that we faced aggression during this war, and that this war has been caused by forces outside of Bosnia. This war is actually a continuation of former wars. For more than a century in this region, we have had Greater Serbian and Greater Croatian wars against Bosnia-Herzegovina as a state. Unfortunately, ideologues and the leaders of these hegemonistic teachings are saying that the "Bosniacs," or better said, the Muslim people, are the greatest obstacle, and they think that if they remove the Bosnians, politically and physically, from this region, they will be in a position to create Greater Serbia, or even Greater Croatia. Unfortunately, this is an old doctrine which is very much alive even today.

On the other hand, we consider ourselves as a kind of buffer zone, a region that can stop further chauvinistic struggles. We consider that our survival here can stop the appetites of Greater Serbia and Greater Croatia, and can establish a certain political, military, and cultural balance in this region and in the region of the Balkans generally.

I would like to remind you, that we have lived here for centuries together. Not a single struggle in Bosnia has begun from within. Every conflict has been begun from the outside.

In that sense, we cannot accept some attitudes, which have been repeatedly expressed in the West, including in America, that this was a civil war, and that we can talk in terms of "the warring factions." Unfortunately, we have faced terrible aggression, very strongly supported from outside, militarily and politically.

I would like to remind you of another fact. Bosnia-Herzegovina as a state, and the Bosniacs, have paid the highest price in the struggle against communism. We are the leaders of the fight against communism in Europe. I hope you have not forgotten, that a Communist Party is still in power in Serbia today, a party which has only changed its name, but not its ideology. The price we paid, of almost 200,000 persons killed out of a population of less than 2 million, in rejecting communism, must not be forgotten. Therefore, we cannot, by any means, accept those estimates, which are either founded on ignorance or on a poor understanding of things here.

This was a fight for democracy. This has to be said clearly. We have expected, that the leaders of democracy would say this themselves, that they would say the truth. Unfortunately, due to some analyses from very high places in the West and in Europe, they say that we are all equally guilty, all equally to blame for the war. This may cause great resentment toward democracy among our people. I ask you to bear this in mind.

For four years we have been asking the democratic world to help us. It is very hard, as a government, for us today to convince our people, especially the families of people who died in this war, that the Western world, the democratic world, was not able to stop these crimes a long time ago. Our people think that this could have been done in 1993 just as well as in 1995.

The post-Dayton situation

Today we are faced with some significant problems. We have accepted the Dayton Accord, in order to stop further destruction and chaos. We do not consider this agreement a just one. We do not think that the aggressor should be rewarded with 49% of the territory of this country. The aggressor never had 49% of the territory; this country has never been divided in this way. In this country, nobody ever counted percentages of territory or a separate ethnic identity. We have simply lived next to one another. We used to live in the same cities and villages together. This was normal. We have never thought in terms of what percentage the Croats occupy, or the Muslims, or Serbs.

But much worse than this is that today we are subjected to terrible pressures, unfortunately, even from the American administration, to release the war criminals. General Shalikashvili was here 20 days ago and he demanded that Serbian Gen. Djordje Djukic be released. You know that he was sent to The Hague, and that charges have been pressed against him. You have to understand, that this demand by General Shalikashvili cannot lead to positive consequences. We expect that American public opinion, American politicians,



Meeting at the Sarajevo Defense Ministry. Left to right: Defense Ministry spokesman Faris Nanic, Umberto Pascali, Paolo Raimondi, Deputy Defense Minister Hasan Cengic, Nihad Dzinovic.

American intellectuals will raise their voice to help ensure the real punishment of the war criminals. Without this punishment, it is not possible to have democracy, peace, and human rights.

We are faced today with the obligation to demobilize our soldiers. During the first six months of this year, 180,000 soldiers will be released from service. In order to grasp the dimension of this number, you must know, that currently in Bosnia-Herzegovina we have 130,000 employees; in production, only half that number. Within two months we expect some turmoil; it could cause the fall of the government.

We are in a paradoxical situation. According to the Dayton agreement, in 1996, there is not one cent allocated for defense in the Federation budget. But there is also not a single cent for taking care of the demobilized soldiers. Without reconstruction of infrastructure, there is no reconstruction of production, there is no industry. Without production and industry, there is no employment. We find ourselves in a closed cycle.

Unfortunately, those who have carefully planned these steps for Bosnia-Herzegovina have not counted on these problems. They have not given systematic solutions. We are not in a position to solve this problem in an official and systematic way. We are in a situation where we have to solve this with the help of non-governmental organizations, or rather, with the help of the humanitarian aid organizations, who treat our soldiers as social cases. You will certainly agree with us: This can be very dangerous, because they are really not social cases. This is why we consider this the first priority. They are very good, excellent workers, and also very good fighters. There is a great danger that with this treatment, we may cause new social problems.

In the political sense, I have to tell you, we have great problems with the implementation of the Federation, unfortunately. There are two different understandings of the Dayton agreement. Our understanding and the Croatian understanding of this is as if we are looking at different contracts, even when we call on the American representatives here, people who were in Dayton, for help and assistance. When they give their stipulation, it is still not accepted by the Croatian side, unfortunately.

Obviously, in wanting to gain political results and to initiate the implementation of the Federation here, sometimes the American side does not do enough to protect the principles of Dayton. What is the essence? Croats accepted making a state from the Federation. We are talking about the present Croatian policy in Bosnia. They would agree to turn the Federation into a separate state, at the same time creating very, very fragile and very weak connections with the State of Bosnia-Herzegovina. This goes to the point of jeopardizing the sovereignty of Bosnia-Herzegovina. This is not acceptable for us. We did not lose the sovereignty of Bosnia during the war, so we will not lose it at the table. This is the essence of the misunderstanding of the federal defense law.

Of course, I would love for somebody to help me, as a person who is in charge of defense, to create a defense system for one country with two legal and completely separate armies, and two legal and completely separate ministries of defense. This is my assignment. With my modest knowledge, it is not possible to find anything like it anywhere in the world. We have to do it. If not, we will be accused of not being cooperative in the Federation. And we are putting ourselves in a situation where aid will be held up, or we may even be faced with completely baseless accusations.

Finally, the question of peace in Bosnia. It is not only a question of relations within Bosnia, but also the question of world relations. This war was not begun only because of us. In the same way, we have not been able to stop it ourselves.

We think that the United States of America and some European countries do not understand the future of Bosnia in the same way that we do. This is reflected also in relations here in Bosnia. We do think that the establishment of a military balance can provide deterrence. If not, it will only be a question of days before the war will begin again. That is why we think the American commitment to establish a military balance, is absolutely correct. But it should be accepted by the European countries. Otherwise, we could have a situation, in which everything that has been done so far, will not yield any fruits.

The danger of hegemonism

I have not spoken about the Croatian or the Serbian people, and I consider neither of them to blame. I consider the people who committed crimes, to be the guilty individuals. Unfortunately, there are lots of them. Among the Serbs, they could make a separate people of criminals, unfortunately.

The Serbian people, the people itself, is never guilty. This also goes for the Croatian people. I am speaking about hegemonic policies.

We are glad that the war is over. But sometimes, we are faced with a very rough violation of this country's sovereignty at the highest level, toward the highest institutions of the State of Bosnia-Herzegovina. In that sense, the position of the IMF is almost the same, as is the approach of some other international organizations. Our government has to cooperate with other governments and international institutions created by these other governments. You also know very well what we have lived through. We are not in a position to change a lot of things.

This is why I share your opinion: Only through real investment, investments of these companies that really want to produce here and work here, can we achieve real progress. It is not clear to us how are we going to pay back these new loans, when we have an old debt which is very big. We have made a proposal which unfortunately has not been accepted.

According to our estimates, at least \$10-12 billion of the property of the Yugoslav National Army is our property. At the same time, we are in a very difficult situation in rescheduling our debt of \$2.5 billion. Why can we not agree, that the international financial institutions pressure Belgrade to solve the problem of our debts and their succession and their obligation? We have tried this, but everybody turned us down. It is easier to pressure the destroyed Bosnia than Serbia.

This is only one of the examples. Unfortunately, we can give you a lot more. We consider that the succession has to be solved, but before that, we have to solve the question of who the aggressor is. This is the beginning of everything: We have to establish who the aggressor was. We know that very well, and world public opinion knows that very well, but this

has to be said in legal terms, which has not been done.

Ben Swan: Do the signers of the Dayton agreement seriously expect you to reduce the size of your military?

Cengic: They believe that we have to do it. And we will do it. However, unless we achieve a military balance, or rather, the modernization of equipment and training of the federal army, then we will be doomed to destruction.

Mobilizing Bosnia's skilled workforce

Mrs. Elke Fimmen asks whether there is a possibility of putting the demobilized soldiers into government projects for rebuilding the country.

Cengic: We are ready to do that, but we have been waiting for money for five months. It would be useful to get some construction machinery to at least clean up. But we have not been able to.

We can employ people. As you certainly know, we have educated people, and our people have been involved in industry for more than a century. We have people who have been working on great projects all over the world, not only in the East, but also in the West, not only in civil engineering. We had cooperation in many fields. If there were real investments, we would be able to solve a great number of problems very soon. We do not need humanitarian aid. We want reconstruction and investments.

The problem of demobilized soldiers was not treated in the Dayton agreement. We were only ordered to demobilize.

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