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The Washington Post

U.N. Officials Dispute U.S. Airdrop Proposal

Peril to Aircrews Over Bosnia Is Cited

By Peter Maass
Special to The Washington Post

SARAJEVO, Bosnia Feb. 21—U.N. military and humanitarian aid officials disagreed today about the wisdom of proposed American airdrops to starving Bosnian civilians, but they concurred that such an operation could entail significant risks to the cargo planes and aircrews involved.

Relief workers here said the most important thing is to get food and medicine to civilians cut off by Serb nationalist forces as quickly as possible, and they noted that the U.N. refugee agency has been requesting airdrops for months. "I'd welcome anything that gets supplies to hungry people," said Tony Land, spokesman for the agency in Sarajevo.

However, a spokesman for U.N. relief support forces on the ground in Bosnia—which now number about 8,000 troops—expressed deep concern about the proposed airdrops, saying they would be too risky and too inefficient. "We are not enthusiastic about the idea," said spokesman Barry Frewer.

Officials of Bosnia's Slavic Muslim-led government vigorously support airdrops to Serb-besieged areas in the war-torn republic—particularly in the east where scores of Muslim towns and villages have been isolated since fighting erupted among Bosnia's Serbs, Muslims and Croats more than 10 months ago.

At the same time, however, officials here say they fear that Washington and the United Nations may view airdrops as an answer to Bosnia's misery rather than a stop-gap measure. "These inventions are new ways to help us that don't really help us," said one Bosnian government figure. "Dropping a few hundred tons of food will not stop the killing. You can't cure cancer with Alka-Selzer."

For their part, residents of Serb-besieged Sarajevo—now in the 11th day of their refusal to accept further U.N. food shipments until the world body provides aid to the starving towns in the east—welcomed the proposed U.S. airdrops as a sign that the democratic superpower is finally moving to ease their suffering. "We have already forgotten what milk looks like, or what onions and vegetables look like," said Hamdo Sicic, a cook at a refugee center here. "So if the only way to help eastern Bosnia is to starve, then we will do it."

Frewer said that the biggest threat to aircraft taking part in airdrops would come from local militia commanders suspicious that the planes might drop weapons and ammunition to combatants on the ground. U.N. truck convoys trying to reach cut-off Muslim towns are routinely subjected to rigorous searches by Serb militiamen; some have gone so far as to shake cans of tuna to make sure there are no bullets inside.

Airdrop material would presumably be available for inspection by all warring sides at embarkation sites, but that would mean militia commanders at the drop points would not be able to examine the supplies, and officials here say that could cause problems. "If there are suspicions on the ground that these are weapons-delivery airdrops, it's anybody's guess what would happen," Frewer said. "They might shoot back."

The U.S. military is considering airdrops from altitudes beyond the range of normal antiaircraft fire, but that limits the accuracy of the drops. It is unclear what antiaircraft weaponry the local Serbs have around such hard-pressed Muslim enclaves as Cerska, Srebrenica, Zepa and Gorazde, but their political patrons in neighboring Serbia have provided them with a range of modern firepower sufficient to have helped them seize 70 percent of Bosnia.

> *"We are not enthusiastic about the idea."*
>
> U.N. spokesman Barry Frewer

Refugee agency spokesman Land noted that an Italian cargo plane was shot down last year while carrying supplies to Sarajevo, killing its four-man crew, and that a number of other Western relief planes have been damaged by groundfire. These attacks occurred even though the warring factions agreed to permit the seven-month-old Sarajevo airlift and on safe air corridors into the city. But if airdrops to besieged Muslim enclaves in eastern Bosnia are begun over the objections of the Serbs, he pointed out, there would be no safe corridors, and risks to the aircrews would be far greater.

Officials of the U.N. aid-support mission here—which consists largely of troops from France, Britain and Spain—say they prefer to press forward with truck convoys to isolated civilians, even though they acknowledge that such efforts have failed to deliver more than token aid to eastern Bosnia.

A 10-truck convoy managed today to reach Zepa, which had received only one other aid shipment since the war began. The success of this convoy, however, required several days of intense negotiations between U.N. officials and local Serb militia forces. "One swallow doesn't make a summer," Land observed. "One convoy into Zepa and one convoy into Cerska is . . . not good enough. Our objective is regular deliveries."

Under a Precarious U.N. Agreement, Food Comes Barging In

By Jennifer Parmelee
Special to The Washington Post

BOR, Sudan—Ten years ago, a barge car-
ng food and other goods was shot up by
i-government rebels along the White Nile.
e attack, one of the first salvos of Sudan's
il war, signaled the breakdown of normal
nmerce channels as the country's south
s slowly shut off from the outside world.

Today, two barges and two tugboats
nted in U.N. blue, bob at the banks of the
er, offering the first hopes to tens of thou-
ds of needy southerners cut off from air
l road links by fighting and a formidable
etch of tropical swamp.

The river boats, loaded with grain, oil and
tils, are here as the result of a Dec. 5
eement among the United Nations, the

danese government and rebel factions that
ould allow humanitarian access into the
ar zone of the south.

In a land where hunger is widespread and
od is power, the barges epitomize a long
ruggle with both sides of the civil war to
liver humanitarian aid.

"These barges have become a kind of sym-
l over the years," said Brenda Barton, a
okeswoman for the U.N. World Food Pro-
am, which operates them. "Now there's
finitely a common commitment by all sides
use the White Nile to feed people."

Last year, in a continuation of long-running
ostilities, the European Community had
lasted the Sudanese government for export-
g sorghum as cattle feed while its people
tarved. The government expelled the Inter-
ational Committee of the Red Cross, accus-
ing it of gun-running for the rebels. Six employees of international aid agencies were killed, three by each side of the conflict.

Both sides meddled with aid efforts. Twice last year, the government commandeered U.N. barges ferrying food to displaced southerners. Until fall, the rebel Sudanese People's Liberation Army threatened to shoot down planes bringing food to Juba, the besieged southern capital, causing long suspension of the desperately needed airlift. Now the atmosphere has changed somewhat.

The accord signals the first time the government has agreed to donate the bulk of the food for the operation—approximately 170,000 tons of grain. It will go to rebel-held as well as government territories.

Serious problems have persisted on the rebel side, however, underlining the sensitive nature of conducting relief operations in a war zone. "Most of our access problems are now in [rebel] areas," the aid official said.

Late last month, a rebel leader hijacked one of the barges at gunpoint as it passed through his faction's territory, claiming he had a hungry constituency to feed. After long negotiations, he was given almost half the food aboard, and he promised safe passage the next time through.

In another incident, rebels shot up the cabin of a barge and took about 15 tons of food—one-tenth of its cargo.

"You have to remember all these people are hungry and desperate, and they thought the barge was passing them by," a U.N. employee aboard said. "They could have taken all the food, but didn't. To their mind, there's a kind of justice being done."

The government response to the hijackings has been mild. Instead of breaking off the deal as in the old days, officials returned to negotiations with the rebels over the weekend to work out ways to ensure smooth passage of the barges to Juba.

The Dec. 5 agreement coincides with other measures taken by Sudan to mend relations with the international community. These include payment of old U.N. debts and a new pact with foreign aid workers lifting restrictions that had caused friction.

Foreign observers said the government's new attitude reflects a growing realization that Sudan cannot sail on indefinitely as an international outcast. In addition, many say, the arrival of U.S. troops in Somalia put pressure on the Khartoum regime.

U.N. Estimates Year's Cost of Somalia Renewal

$253 Million 'Wish List' Includes Public Works, Feeding Programs,

By Stuart Auerbach
Washington Post Staff Writer

MOGADISHU, Somalia, Feb. 21 –The United Nations has placed a 253 million price tag for the rest of his year on the rehabilitation of a omali nation devastated by two ears of civil war and one of the orst famines in recent history.

The estimated cost is contained in draft U.N. document that amounts o a wish list by the U.N. agencies nd private international relief roups that have been operating ere. It is intended as a change from he band-aid approach that tries to top the fighting and feed the starv- ng to an effort to rebuild Somalia nto a peaceful nation with a func- ioning government and other insti- utions.

According to the document being repared for a meeting of donor na- ions next month, the largest chunk f the money—$92.2 million—would e used to resettle an estimated 00,000 Somalis who moved to oth- r parts of the country, plus another 800,000 who fled to neighboring countries to escape fighting and starvation.

Despite hopes that the October harvest will be good enough to break the cycle of famine, the U.N. report estimated that aid agencies will need to spend $43 million on feeding programs this year.

The report made clear that any success in rebuilding Somalia depends on a smooth turnover of peace-keeping responsibility from a force led and dominated by U.S. troops to a smaller multinational U.N. force. U.S. officials are pushing for a quick transition, and on Saturday the special U.S. envoy here, Robert B. Oakley, sharply criticized U.N. officials for stalling.

Even with a 32,000-member peace-keeping force, the U.N. report noted, "the social and political situation throughout Somalia remains extremely complex and tense" as "fear and mistrust" permeate relations among the country's clans and subclans.

The report underscores the daunting task faced by those trying to rebuild Somalia.

"Somalia as a nation and a society lies in ruins," the report states. Its government and administrative organs are nonexistent. It has no central bank; schools, hospitals and health clinics have been destroyed, and most of its businesses and industries have been looted, their machinery and equipment sold abroad. There is no electricity, no telephone service and the water system in this seaside capital barely functions.

Further, the U.N. report says 300,000 to 500,000 Somalis died last year as a result of fighting, starvation or disease, another 1.5 million are "at great risk" of death or illness, and 4.5 million people—90 percent of the population—need some form of assistance.

But, the U.N. report concluded, "a substantial portion of Somalis are ready to rebuild their lives and their society."

Rehabilitation plans include large-scale public works projects to rebuild roads, clear irrigation canals and construct sanitation facilities, according to the report. Tens of thousands of young men who have held power in militias during the past two years need to be given vocational training and put to work. Farmers need seeds, blankets and simple tools so they can return to the land, and nomadic herders need help in rebuilding their stock of camels, sheep, goats and cows—the source of 90 percent of prewar Somalia's foreign exchange earnings.

The price tag for helping farmers and herders was placed at $20.1 million, while vocational training for the former fighters will cost another $20 million.

According to the U.N. report, the country needs to reestablish 15 hospitals, 90 health clinics and 500 smaller outposts in outlying villages. As a result of the fighting, the United Nations estimated, there are 9,000 persons in Mogadishu who need surgery to correct war wounds.

Syria Signals Support For Resuming Talks

Christopher: U.S. May Take 'More Active Role'

By John M. Goshko
Washington Post Staff Writer

RIYADH, Saudi Arabia, Feb. 21—Syrian leaders gave Secretary of State Warren M. Christopher a clear signal today that if Israel makes a significant gesture toward permitting return of almost 400 Palestinian deportees, Syria would favor restarting the stalled Middle East peace process as soon as possible.

In return, Christopher said he was "greatly encouraged" after almost four hours of talks with Syrian President Hafez Assad in Damascus, the Syrian capital. He added that if the peace talks resume, President Clinton "intends to take a more active role than the U.S. has had in the past."

Christopher and Syrian Foreign Minister Farouk Charaa said at a news conference that their governments agree on the urgency of getting the talks going.

The 15-month-old peace process has been in limbo since Dec. 17 when Israel expelled the Palestinians to a no man's land between Israel and Lebanon. Israel accused the deportees of links to Muslim fundamentalist groups engaging in terrorism. Palestinian participants in the peace talks, backed by Arab governments, have said they will not rejoin the negotiations until the deportees are allowed to return.

"There is no doubt that the deportee situation has become like a thorn in resuming the peace talks," Charaa said. "We have to remove this thorn, and we should work together to have the peace talks resume in a convenient and agreeable atmosphere."

He added that Syria sees no conflict in pursuing both aims because they represent goals of the international community as reflected in U.N. Security Council resolutions. The council has demanded that Israel allow the deportees to return, and the peace process is rooted in council resolutions calling for a negotiated settlement of the Arab-Israeli conflict.

His words were greeted with elation by U.S. officials who consider Syria's support a crucial part of their strategy to coax the Palestinians back into the negotiations.

Syria traditionally has been among Israel's most implacable foes. However, Assad is thought to believe that the peace process has enhanced Syria's hopes of regaining the Golan Heights, captured by Israel in the 1967 Middle East war.

The Palestinians fear that a separate Israeli-Syrian deal would leave them isolated and weakened in their hope of winning independence from Israel for the occupied West Bank and Gaza Strip. For that reason, the United States hopes to convince the Palestinian delegates and their backers within the Palestine Liberation Organization that if they stay away from the negotiations, they would run the risk of being left behind while other Arab governments make agreements with Israel.

While en route here tonight for talks with Saudi leaders, U.S. officials were openly hopeful that Charaa's compromise-oriented language would boost the U.S. argument.

In hopes of defusing the deportee problem, Christopher and Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin agreed this month that Israel would permit immediate return of 101 of the 396 Palestinians still in the barren, hillside tent city and the rest by the end of the year.

A senior U.S. official said Christopher and Assad also laid the basis for what he called "a high-level dialogue" on issues including terrorism, narcotics control, human rights and treatment of Syrian Jews.

Israel Elects Chief Rabbis In Race Marred by Charges

Reuter

JERUSALEM, Feb. 21—Israeli rabbinical and political leaders elected new chief rabbis today, following a campaign marred by allegations that candidates engaged in romantic escapades and evaded military service.

Tel Aviv Chief Rabbi Yisrael Meir Lau, 56, was elected chief rabbi of the Ashkenazic Jews, descendants of European Jews. Earlier this month, a woman astrologer accused Lau in an Israeli newspaper of having pursued her and tried to kiss her 20 years ago.

Haifa Rabbi Eliyahu Baksi-Doron, 52, will head the Sephardic community of Oriental Jews. He was the object of a rumor campaign during the election that he took part in draft-dodging fraud.

ANC Begins Political Transition

Anti-Apartheid Conference Lays Groundwork for Election

By Paul Taylor
Washington Post Foreign Service

JOHANNESBURG, Feb. 21—At the ripe old age of 81, the African National Congress began to transform itself this weekend from a liberation movement into a political party.

"You are here to help us move from anti-apartheid to democracy," ANC President Nelson Mandela told 650 delegates to an international anti-apartheid conference, the first held by the ANC on its native soil since a government ban on the organization was lifted three years ago. "We know you will walk this last mile . . . [and] work with us to win a resounding victory" in South Africa's first nonracial election, expected to be held early next year.

Mandela, 74, spoke only for a few minutes, having been hospitalized the previous three days for flu-like symptoms and exhaustion. His doctors have ordered him to rest for two weeks.

The ANC used the conference to start passing the hat throughout its global constituency for a hoped-for $43 million in campaign contributions; to set forth a timetable for the lifting of remaining economic and political sanctions against South Africa; and to explain why it agreed last week to a transitional government of national unity that is expected to remain in power for five years after the election.

"A lot of the delegates came here with dated views and no real understanding of the complexities of the transition," said a Western ambassador. "The ANC has done a good job of explaining that white ministers aren't going to be strung up from lampposts after that first election. That may disappoint a few of the activists, but believe me, it's quite reassuring to almost everyone else."

Under the government-ANC proposal, which the ANC's executive council ratified last week, all parties that receive more than 5 percent of the vote will have a number of seats proportional to their electoral support in the legislative and executive branches of the first post-apartheid government. During his remarks today, Mandela suggested that a phased-in transition is the only way to keep South Africa from breaking apart, saying, "After so much sacrifice by so many, we have the obligation to prevent disintegration into Yugoslavia."

The proposed transitional government has sparked heated controversy within the ANC, and provoked cries of "sellout" from extremists on both the left and the right. Last week, the militant Pan Africanist Congress charged that the ANC and the ruling National Party—which are expected to be the top two vote getters—"are going to get married and give birth to a baby called neo-colonialism."

Stung by the criticism, the ANC has been assuring supporters at home and abroad that the principle of majority rule will prevail in the coalition government, meaning that if the ANC wins more than 50 percent of the vote, as expected, it will have effective control.

The National Party, by contrast, has been characterizing the transitional government as one in which the cabinet will rule by consensus.

The anticipated compromise—still to be negotiated by the government and the ANC, then approved by a multi-party conference that will convene next month—would give the president of the transitional government, likely to be Mandela, undiluted power in certain areas and make his power subject to a two-thirds vote of the cabinet in other areas.

"Wherever they finally draw the line, the encouraging thing is that the ANC is living in the real world, where it knows it needs to cooperate at least for a while with those already in power if it wants to attract investment, avoid a brain drain and phase in control of the military," said the Western ambassador.

This weekend, the ANC distributed brochures to its foreign visitors, detailing needs ranging from 108 desktop computers and 94 fax machines to 50,000 audio cassettes and 700,000 T-shirts.

The ANC has always drawn the lion's share of its financial backing from abroad, relying on a mix of foreign governments, principally Scandinavian, and church, progressive, labor and business groups. Some of the backers are expected to be skittish about funding a political party, rather than a liberation movement, but most seem to view an ANC-led government as the natural culmination of their years in the anti-apartheid struggle.

"It is certainly the moral position—after all this time of working to end apartheid, you want to make sure a democratic government gets into power," said William Lucy, head of the Coalition of Black Trade Unions in the United States and one of about 80 Americans who attended the conference. The biggest single donor this weekend was heavyweight boxing champion Riddick Bowe, who gave $100,000.

Also this weekend, President Frederik W. de Klerk appointed two mixed-race Coloreds and an Indian to full-rank cabinet positions, the first time non-whites have been elevated to the cabinet. The new ministers represent swing constituencies that together make up about 10 percent of South African's electorate and are thought to be leaning toward the National Party over the ANC. The ANC denounced the move as "window dressing."

Cut Off From Everything but War

Isolated and Devastated, Southern Sudan Seeks Glimmer of Hope

By Jennifer Parmelee
Special to The Washington Post

BOR, Sudan—Dreary, devastated and silent as a mausoleum, this army outpost on the banks of the White Nile could be almost any town in southern Sudan, where war has become a way of life.

The hospital is stripped of equipment, doors and medicine. The girls' school has been bombed to rubble. Tractors and earthmovers brought in for an ambitious rice project sit rusting amid the thorn trees. Neat groups of mud-and-grass huts have been burned, leaving blackened circles in the dust.

Of the town's estimated 30,000 former inhabitants, only a few remain. Soldiers and refugees from hunger and conflict make up most of the visible human life.

A handful of small boys wearing discarded army shirts chased goats down the dirt streets one day recently. A ragged Sudanese flag flew over the facade of an artillery-battered post office that had not handled a letter since the long-simmering hostilities between north and south broke out into civil war again in 1983. Around the town's perimeter, soldiers guarded rocket-launchers in trenches, aimed at the anti-government rebels who stalk the countryside somewhere beyond.

In camps on the outskirts of town, a few thousand civilians displaced by the war and tribal conflict that have ravaged the south subsist on donated rations brought in by plane and river barge.

Except for the distinctive facial scars of the Dinka tribe, the refugees resemble the inhabitants of camps for refugees and displaced people across the Horn of Africa—one of the world's most disrupted regions.

Wasted figures of women hold out handfuls of wild fruit and nuts to show visitors how they live; youngsters—all eyes, skin and bones—sit naked; old men hunch in dismal huts; a solitary, emaciated figure stands in a makeshift church of brick and tin, shorn head bowed and hands clasped in prayer before a row of rude crosses.

Then you notice there are no males above about 11 years old—the fighting age in this rough country. There is also what an aid worker calls "a shocking absence" of children between ages 1 and 5, usually a lively group among African populations. Most of the inhabitants are young women, winners in a Darwinian-style struggle that has taken away just about everything that matters—homes and husbands, cattle and young ones.

"These are the strong ones, the lucky ones," Russell Ulrey, logistics officer for the World Food Program in Khartoum, the Sudanese capital, said in a recent visit. "These are the ones who survived."

Periodic bulletins of distress from southern Sudan were all but eclipsed by the disaster in Somalia, 900 miles to the east. Yet aid workers familiar with both countries say the level of human suffering is comparable. While there is no way to make an accurate head count in isolated villages often cut off by fighting, aid workers estimate several hundred thousand Sudanese face starvation if they do not receive aid soon.

"It is a silent famine, the most silent of the major humanitarian crises around the world today," James Kunder, director of the U.S. Agency for International Development's Office of Foreign Disaster Assistance, said after a recent visit.

BY JOSEPH ROBINSON—THE WASHINGTON POST

As in Somalia, the chief culprit is not drought or natural calamity, but conflict. It is a war that has been fueled by religious antagonism, tribal and racial hatreds, the legacy of colonial divide-and-rule, still-burning memories of northern slave traders who plundered the south well into this century, and simple neglect.

Millions of southerners are trapped between the escalating government offensive, which has reached farther than ever in a decade of war, and a deteriorating but still-destructive rebel defense.

Savage tactics have been used by all sides. One of the latest was a grisly response by the Sudanese People's Liberation Army to what it perceives as a campaign by the Muslim fundamentalist government to impose Islamic religion and law—which can include amputation of limbs of criminals—on the mostly pagan and Christian south. The Liberation Army severed the arms of some prisoners of war and sent them back over enemy lines.

As in Somalia, food has been used as a weapon, and tribal battles, once conducted with spears and knives, now are waged with automatic weapons, which are abundant amid the food shortages.

The famished region of southern Sudan covers a territory bigger than Texas, and is one of the most inaccessible on earth. With only a few dozen miles of paved road, its dominant feature is the "Sudd"—Arabic for "barrier"—the impenetrable area where the White Nile spreads into hundreds of square miles of swampland infested by snakes, crocodiles and malarial mosquitoes.

Many of the neediest southerners are concentrated in the Sudd, where—as here in Bor—airstrips turn to mud during the long rains.

Farming, with few tools, is only for subsistence. Fish are caught with spears or nets that have been repeatedly mended since the last trading ships turned up a decade ago. Most towns have been abandoned or ruined.

The casualties of 10 years of war are stunning: a near-total collapse of education and health care; land mines in wells and schools, orchards and fields; a generation of amputees and youngsters who have lost touch with families and traditions; the shattering of development hopes when companies such as Chevron left because of the fighting.

"You don't want to sound hard-hearted, but the famine is the same story every year," Ulrey said. "The worst thing is that a whole culture, a whole civilization, is disappearing."

Pech Akour, commissioner of Upper Nile state, whose capital is Bor, frets about "the loss of one or two generations in the south" and has plans to rebuild schools, a market, the hospital—anything to attract people back to what he calls "normal life."

Southerners remain skeptical about government intentions, however, and usually abandon towns when troops move in. Migration for survival is commonplace. Cattle, a chief source of wealth, are fast disappearing—victims of war, floods, drought and tribal raids.

Only 1½ years ago, Kongor, a town 75 miles north of Bor, had a cattle population numbering in the hundreds of thousands. During a recent World Food Program survey, not one was spotted within a 20-mile radius around town.

Kongor's inhabitants lived on gourd seeds and wild fruit, aid officials said. When the first U.N. plane in a year came in December, it was greeted by skeletal figures, many too weak to do anything but crawl.

The United Nations has struggled to get permission to deliver food to areas such as Kongor and Bor, and in December won a commitment by the government of Sudan and representatives of the major rebel factions to allow access to contested areas where people were in critical need. One of the greatest achievements was an arrangement to allow food delivery by barge, the only way to reach most areas of the Sudd, especially in the wet season.

Yet the war persists and Kongor is cut off by new fighting, World Food Program officials said over the weekend. No new dry-season offensive by the government has been announced, but a senior government official said the army aims to finish the "objectives" of last year's offensive.

In 1992, government troops secured most main towns, including Kapoeta, Torit, Pochala and Bor—all onetime rebel strongholds. They were aided by the sharp divisions, mainly along tribal lines, that surfaced within the rebel Liberation Army after it lost the backing of Ethiopia following a change of governments there in May 1991.

But the government army, wl fighting more effectively than dur any period of the last decade, fai to cut off what Sudanese officials a Western diplomats agree is a m supply route to the rebels, fr across the Uganda border. To along the frontier are the next get, the government official said.

According to relief workers v ried about hundreds of thousand destitute Sudanese who inhabit area, the siege has already beg Kajo-Kaji, a rebel-controlled post the Ugandan border, was bomb this month, killing 10 civilians.

The government, however, longer talks of military victory, cc ceding that a negotiated peace is t only long-term solution. Officials sa they are prepared to offer fede status to southern states, to guara tee exemption from Islamic rul and—in a break with tradition—share resources and power.

But some rebels remain suspiciou of the peace overtures, especial Liberation Army leader John Garan who remains the chief holdout to a other round of peace talks.

"The government has taken th main towns and roads, but like th Americans in Vietnam, they don' control the territory," a Western dip lomat said. "This is essentially a unwinnable war. . . . The only sen sible strategy now for the govern ment is to fight and talk."

Major Seeking To Shore Up Ties With U.S.

Crisis-Prone British Leader To Hold Talks With Clinton

By Eugene Robinson
Washington Post Foreign Service

LONDON, Feb. 21—Last fall, when British economic policy was changing almost hourly and the government was forced into a series of humiliating reversals, it looked as if Prime Minister John Major was merely struggling through a patch of political misfortune. Surely, aides predicted, calmer days lay just ahead.

But now, as Major prepares for his first meeting with President Clinton on Wednesday, his government continues to lurch from crisis to crisis, and critics say the British leader seems to have an uncanny instinct for making a beeline toward the brink of political disaster.

After an abrupt shift by Major's government this past week on a proposed amendment to a controversial treaty on European union, even the Daily Telegraph, normally a steadfast supporter of Major's Conservative Party, conceded there may be substance to "the impression that this is a government not fully in command of its policies." Spokesmen for the opposition Labor Party accused the government of "confusion and disarray" and of resorting to "scurrilous" tactics to avoid a parliamentary defeat.

Major may have survived the latest row over European union, but he is still backpedaling on a wide array of domestic initiatives, from closures of state-run coal mines to rail-system privatization to hospital reorganization. With just a 21-vote majority in the 650-member House of Commons, he is hostage to any significant group of Conservative rebels who unite around an issue.

In his visit to Washington, Major will try to resuscitate the wheezing "special relationship" between Britain and the United States amid what a senior U.S. diplomat here has called "palpable apprehension" about the future of those historic ties. The British political, economic and journalistic establishment does not know Clinton—he and Major have never met—and officials here worry that the U.S. president may not have Britain's interests uppermost in mind as he struggles to formulate foreign policy in a changing world.

Major also faces a potential hurdle in his talks with Clinton because of the Conservative Party's open support for president George Bush in last year's U.S. election. The party leadership sent two political strategists to tutor the Bush campaign in methods the Conservatives used to defeat Labor in national elections here last spring.

But a senior aide to Major argued this past week that the Conservative-GOP link "has been overdone" as an issue and has not cast a shadow over the relationship. The official allowed, however, that perhaps it is not fully understood in the United States that the Conservative strategists were dispatched by the central party apparatus, not by Major's government.

This is not the first time that British officials have greeted a new U.S. administration with concern for future ties. When Bush took office, some of his advisers suggested adopting a broader approach to Europe that would elevate France and Germany to a status similar to Britain's. Aides to then-prime minister Margaret Thatcher worried aloud that the relationship might lose its cohesiveness without the friendship that had existed between Thatcher and former president Ronald Reagan to bind it.

But Thatcher waved them off. "Don't worry," she told aides. "Wait until there's a crisis, and they'll find out who their real friends are." When Iraq invaded Kuwait, Thatcher gave Bush her full support and dispatched troops to help fight the Persian Gulf War. She may have lectured Bush a bit and pined openly for the Reagan days, but the relationship continued more or less unchanged.

This time, British nervousness appears

greater. As one indicator, British leaders have waged a campaign to persuade Clinton to retain U.S. Ambassador Raymond G. Seitz, a Bush appointee and the first career diplomat to head the embassy here. Seitz has frequently argued that it should be possible to keep the relationship alive in the post-Cold War era. The White House has not announced whether Seitz will be kept on.

British officials have bent over backward lately to accommodate Clinton. Several months ago, they expressed alarm at his suggestion of sending a U.S. envoy to strife-torn British Northern Ireland. Now, officials here say they could accept such a move.

"If the Clinton administration thought it would be useful, then we would have no objection," said an aide to Major. "The more people who go to Northern Ireland and understand the situation, the better."

British officials have praised Clinton's cautious involvement in efforts to end factional fighting in Bosnia-Herzegovina, a stance that has drawn criticism elsewhere. Officials here also have refused to join in a chorus of complaints by European nations that the new U.S. administration is leaning toward protectionist trade policies. They argue it is too early to tell.

Britain's eagerness to shore up the relationship comes amid concern over London's place in the world. Foreign Secretary Douglas Hurd recently declared that Britain should continue to "punch above its weight" in international affairs—an apparent acknowledgment that in the post-Cold War world, Britain is slipping from heavyweight to middleweight status.

In talks on European union, Britain has emphasized its position as a bridge between the United States and Europe. On trade issues, Britain is seeking to dissuade the Clinton administration from raising tariffs and other trade barriers, but at the same time officials here are urging their European neighbors to be more accommodating to U.S. positions on such touchy issues as farm subsidies. On security, Britain is eager to retain its seat in the U.N. Security Council amid suggestions that Japan and Germany should be added.

Nonetheless, Major's government still appears off balance, as illustrated by the flap over the Maastricht Treaty, which lays out a blueprint for European political and economic union.

Last week, Major's government, which had narrowly headed off a move by Conservative rebels to scuttle the treaty two months ago, made what was viewed as an embarrassing turnabout on a key issue, an amendment aimed at standardizing rules on working conditions and other matters. The amendment was backed by the opposition Labor Party and by Conservative rebels.

Major initially opposed the amendment, saying it would cost Britain thousands of jobs. But last Monday, the government, facing probable defeat on the issue, shifted ground. Citing "new legal advice," the government declared that for technical reasons the amendment would have no impact on the treaty, although it will continue to oppose the measure. Although the crisis appeared over, it indicated that the treaty is not out of the parliamentary woods.

Meanwhile, for Major's government, there was little rest. Soon afterward, the government announced that unemployment had topped the symbolic 3 million mark. Coal miners were in court to seek further changes in the government's energy policy. Government initiatives on health care and education were under fire. And Major still seemed to be seeking his stride.

Foreign Journal

You May Now Board the Plane; Please Ignore the Burned Wreck by the Runway

By Margaret Shapiro
Washington Post Foreign Service

MOSCOW

Travelers in the former Soviet Union fortify themselves with a certain black humor, a competition to top the latest tale of the worst hotel (in southern Armenia, with rats in the bathroom, mice in the bed and mushrooms on the walls), the most delayed flight (out of Khabarovsk, where riots broke out after a week of waiting) and the most bizarre airplane conditions (snowdrifts in an unheated cabin).

This is one of the ironies of life in the former Soviet Union: Just when it became possible to go anywhere—and there are so many interesting places and warm-hearted people—the process of traveling has become so grim as to make one almost long for the days of stony-faced Intourist guides.

Travel was never luxurious here, even in the empire's heyday. But airplanes hewed to a rough schedule, visa regulations did not change daily, hotels for foreigners provided heat and hot water, and one was not forced to share a taxi or bus ride with a gun-toting ethnic warrior in full battle gear.

Now, with the superpower splintered, local wars flaring, and economic and political chaos taking their toll, even basic comforts can no longer be counted on.

Moscow's busy Domodedovo Airport provides a case study. Planes are so often delayed for days at a time—by lack of fuel, bad weather, warfare at the other end or simply unknowable causes—that the airport's grimy, poorly lit corridors are filled with exhausted families camping out and waiting, blankets spread on the muddy tiles, and diapers and undershirts hanging out to dry.

Inexplicably, departures may be announced and passengers hurriedly herded onto a frigid, dilapidated bus—only to find, on a distant corner of the airfield, a darkened plane, still covered with snow and ice, without stairways or pilots. On lucky days, passengers are then returned to the "waiting lounge." Often they must simply huddle beneath the ghostly jet or walk back, dodging taxiing planes on the dimly lit tarmac.

There is one advantage to this departure ordeal: When passengers finally do leave, they barely flinch at

BY ROB SHEPPERSON FOR THE WASHINGTON POST

the sight of the broken, charred plane wreckage that has been lying just off Domodedovo's runway for months, or at the filthy condition of the plane they are on, or at the several people (and sometimes animals) standing in the aisle because there are not enough seats.

Aeroflot is one of the main casualties of the break-up of the Soviet Union. Chunks of its vast fleet have been handed over to now-independent republics, and the airline operates at a deficit with less and less government money to bail it out. While officials give assurances that the fleet is safe, the anecdotal evidence is disquieting.

A government-sponsored flight of foreign correspondents several months ago, for instance, made a forced return to Moscow when one of its two engines blew out and a tire exploded. "Don't worry," an officer accompanying the group said calmly. "Nothing out of the ordinary." One U.S. airline official recently commented that the condition of Aeroflot tires was so bad that the planes would be grounded in the United States.

In a country where many products are still scarce and anything can be sold on the streets, it is not surprising that Aeroflot has been stripped of safety vests and other removable items. It was nonetheless a shock on one trip to find a hotel using an Aeroflot toilet seat in the bathroom—complete with instructions about not throwing objects down the chute.

Meanwhile, fuel shortages and frayed relations among these newly independent—and increasingly impoverished—republics mean that official airline schedules bear little resemblance to reality. Dozens of scheduled routes simply do not fly.

All public transport out of Ukraine grounded to a halt a few months ago because of fuel shortages. Similarly, lack of fuel last winter shut down the Khabarovsk airport, the main hub for Russia's Far East, leving people stranded and so angry that after a week they rioted.

The fuel shortages have created some unsettling experiences. On a recent flight from Armenia, the pilot announced on takeoff that he would have to stop for more fuel in 40 minutes. That meant a pit stop in Grozny, capital of the secessionist state of Chechenya, known for arms and drug trafficking. When the plane landed, it was immediately surrounded by armed local militiamen, guns and attack dogs at the ready, who remained in place for the entire refueling prohibiting anyone from disembarking.

Hotels too are not for the faint-hearted. A few top-quality hotels exist in Moscow, St. Petersburg and a handful of other cities, but elsewhere conditions can only be described as very, very basic.

In Chechenya, for instance, the hotel canteen provided bits of what appeared to be week-old chicken. In Yakutsk, the diamond capital of Russia, the hotel dining room was closed every day for cleaning, and there was no immediately evident spot to eat without authorization of the local parliament.

No place, however, can compete with hotels in Armenia, where a fuel blockade has left the country without heat, running water, flushing toilets, electricity and telephone service. Just six months ago, it was enough to bring a few bottles of water, a small plug-in immersion heater to make coffee in one's room and a willingness to wait for the few hours a day of electricity to take a (cold) shower or flush the toilet—both possible only when water pumps are operating.

Today, travelers must equip themselves with flashlights, boxes of matches and candles to find their way at night in Armenia's main tourist hotel, a massive marble structure that has become a gloomy, frigid tomb. To keep warm at night, they must sleep under eight heavy blankets and wear every article of clothing, including hats and gloves. And they must not expect any respite when morning comes, because electric hot water heaters don't work without electricity. Savvy travelers now carry Sterno.

SYRIANS PUT ISSUE OF PEACE EFFORT BEFORE DEPORTEES

CONCILIATION TOWARD U.S.

Christopher Promises the More Active Role by Washington Long Favored by Arabs

By ELAINE SCIOLINO
Special to The New York Times

RIYADH, Saudi Arabia, Feb. 21 — In an unusually conciliatory gesture to the Clinton Administration, Syria said today that it would not link the return of nearly 400 Palestinians deported by Israel to the resumption of the stalled ddle East peace talks. It said a successful peace settlement for the region was a much higher priority.

The move was apparently prompted by a promise by Secretary of State Warren Christopher that Washington would play an active role in the negotiations if and when they start up again.

At a joint news conference in Damascus, Syria, before Mr. Christopher flew to Saudi Arabia, Foreign Minister Farouk al-Sharaa called peace "broader and more important" that the deportee issue because it is "bound to change the face of the region." He strongly endorsed Washington's effort to restart the peace talks as soon as possible and called the question of the deportees "a thorn in resuming the peace process" that had to be removed.

Deportees Ease Stand

A spokesman for the deportees, who are stranded in Lebanon between Israeli and Lebanese Army checkpoints, said today that they would accept a return in stages, The Associated Press reported. The Palestinians had insisted that none would return until all of them were allowed to.

"We will accept a timetable for our return only if Israel declares with international guarantees that it will not deport any Palestinian anymore," said Aziz Dweik, a spokesman for the deportees.

Christopher Meets Assad

The deportees are Islamic fundamentalists accused by Israel of being security threats. Israel has offered to take back about 100 immediately and the rest by the end of the year, a compromise the Palestinians had rejected.

Mr. Sharaa's remarks followed a three-and-a-half-hour meeting between President Hafez al-Assad of Syria and Mr. Christopher at which the Secretary of State offered to intervene more directly in the peace negotiations than the Bush Administration had.

"We intend, if anything, to be more active than the United States has been in the past," Mr. Christopher told reporters.

Throughout his weeklong tour of Egypt, Jordan, Syria and Saudi Arabia, Mr. Christopher has said over and over that the United States would act as a "full partner" in bringing peace to the region. This approach is intended to draw the Arab governments and Palestinians into Washington's camp and to isolate the deportees, who seem determined to block any peace negotiations.

The Bush Administration had tried to influence the Middle East peace negotiations as an outside broker. Some senior officials in the new Administration have castigated their predecessors, saying they abandoned the peace talks during the Presidential campaign.

Today, Mr. Christopher offered the first glimpse of what "full partnership" might mean. He said that the United States would "perhaps lend some ideas of its own" once the talks resumed, and that on a number of issues the positions of the parties were close enough that the United States could move them to an actual agreement.

Meeting With King Fahd

A senior Administration official told reporters on the plane from Damascus to Riyadh, where Mr. Christopher met tonight with King Fahd, that the Secretary was referring to the talks between Israel and Syria last fall, when the two sides discussed the possibility that Israel would relinquish land in exchange for peace with its Arab neighbor.

The negotiating process ground to a halt in December when Israel deported the Palestinians, and the main mission of Mr. Christopher's tour is to breathe new life into the negotiations. He is scheduled to go from here to Kuwait, and then to Israel, though he has not ruled out a short stop in Lebanon after Kuwait.

The Palestinian delegation has refused to return to the talks until a Security Council resolution demanding the immediate return of the deportees is carried out, and it has thus far refused to accept a United States-Israeli arrangement for the phased return of the deportees.

A senior Administration official said

U.S. promises the more active role urged by Arabs.

Mr. Christopher would tell the Israelis that leaders in Egypt, Jordan and Syria all said that they were eager to get back to the negotiating table and that there was a need to speed the process of taking back the deportees.

At the news conference in Damascus, Foreign Minister Sharaa also said Syria had presented Mr. Christopher with its own ideas for resolving the deportee issue, but he declined to elaborate.

A senior Administration official praised Syria's restraint in not directly demanding the immediate return of the deportees, saying it reflected Syria's effort to find a way around the troublesome issue. "He talked about a thorn," the official said of Mr. Sharaa's remarks, calling a thorn "something that pricks the body" and "something small and irritating." But, the official said, "the body is what is important."

Today's meeting with Mr. Assad il-

Syria Puts Issue of Peace Talks Before Deportees

lustrated that the Clinton Administration, despite its stated commitment to promoting democracy and human rights around the world, is apparently willing to overlook Syria's dismal record to win support for resumption of the peace talks. The Bush Administration disregarded similar problems in 1990 to convince Syria to join the United States-led coalition against Iraq after the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait.

But both Mr. Clinton and Mr. Christopher had promised to act differently.

Terrorism Discussed

When asked today whether he had pressed Mr. Assad on the need to democratize Syrian politics and whether he had raised the issue of Syria's continuing support for international terrorism, Mr. Christopher dodged the question, saying: "We discussed both those subjects. I don't want to get further into the nature of the discussion."

A senior Administration official said the two men had also discussed terrorism, international drug trafficking and the need for Syria to grant exit visas to Jews. He added that Mr. Assad had given a "firm commitment" on lifting the suspension of exit visas for Jews, but the official said nothing on the other issues.

Syria remains on the State Department's list of countries supporting international terrorism. Its officials are active in extensive heroin cultivation and trafficking in Lebanon, according to the annual State Department report on narcotics. And Mr. Assad's reputation in the region for ruthlessness and tight political control is outmatched only by that of President Saddam Hussein of Iraq.

But the Syria that represses its people at home is apparently different for the Clinton Administration from the Syria that is willing to make peace with Israel.

Mr. Christopher had said earlier that he was not carrying initiatives on his first overseas trip, and his aides had indicated that he was not about to waste his time promoting peace talks if he found no interest in the region. But he apparently hopes that by offering to get inside the negotiating process rather than sitting outside the door, he can convince not only Syria but also the Palestinians and other Arab negotiators to return quickly to the table regardless of whether all the deportees have returned home.

The idea of an activist United States that would actually make proposals had been rejected by Yitzhak Shamir when he was Israel's Prime Minister; he insisted that Israel negotiate directly with the Palestinians and with Arab governments without Washington's pressure or interference.

But the Palestinians and the Arab governments have consistently favored an interventionist role for United States, and with the selection of Yitzhak Rabin as Prime Minister last summer, there could be more willingness on the part of Israel to tolerate such an approach.

Israeli Electors Select the Two Chief Rabbis

Special to The New York Times

JERUSALEM, Feb. 21 — After a campaign sullied by charges of mischief and wrongdoing, Israeli rabbinical elders and political leaders chose Chief Rabbis today for the Ashkenazic and Sephardic branches of Judaism.

The election may affect Israel's governing coalition because the results seem to strengthen Shas, a party of fervently Orthodox Sephardic Jews. Shas, the coalition's only religious party, supported both winning candidates.

Rabbi Yisrael Meir Lau, 56, Chief Rabbi of Tel Aviv, won the closely watched race to represent Ashkenazic Jews, or those of Eastern and Central European origin. Several women accused him of trying to seduce them. He sued one for a libel.

Rabbi Eliahu Bakshi-Doron, 52, of Haifa, won the Sephardic contest, affecting Jews with Mediterranean, Middle Eastern and North African backgrounds. He had his own problems: affidavits charging he once tried to bribe a Haifa City Council candidate to drop out of the race. He denied the charges.

The atmosphere was so thick with accusations that at one point the incumbent Chief Rabbis publicly deplored the quality of the campaign. Nor was the new rabbis' moral authority enhanced after a former Ashkenazic Chief Rabbi, Shlomo Goren, called the candidates "minor leaguers" in scriptural scholarship.

Nearly 150 electors chose the Chief Rabbis, whose interpretations of Jewish law are binding on the Government.

The positions have political roots.

De Klerk Names Three Nonwhites to Cabinet Posts

By BILL KELLER
Special to The New York Times

JOHANNESBURG, Feb. 21 — President F.W. de Klerk has named the first nonwhites to his Cabinet, in a bid to broaden the appeal of his National Party prior to South Africa's first universal elections.

Mr. de Klerk announced Saturday night that he gave minor Cabinet posts to two mixed-race politicians, known as "coloreds" in South Africa, and to an Indian lawyer. He considered naming a black to his inner circle, he said, but decided this would be viewed as tokenism and distract attention from negotiations with black groups on the country's future.

Any prominent black figure who accepted a place in the Government before blacks are given the vote would face strong condemnation for collaborating with the white-dominated regime.

Indians and "coloreds" have had their own separate chambers of Parliament since 1985, and for several years nonwhite members of Parliament were included in the Cabinet under Mr. de Klerk's predecessor, P. W. Botha. The last of these quit in 1987, and since then the Cabinet has been all white.

The African National Congress today dismissed the appointments as "an empty gesture" and said nonracial government would be achieved by elections, not by co-opting nonwhites into a white regime.

Despite its history as the party that founded apartheid, the National Party under Mr. de Klerk has won widespread popularity in the mixed-race and Indian communities.

Among the million Indians and 3 million mixed-race South Africans, there is deep worry about the numerous Communists in the leadership of the African National Congress, and a fear of being pushed aside in a rush of affirmative action for blacks.

Generally, mixed-race South Africans are predominantly Afrikaans-speaking and feel a stronger affinity for white European culture than for black African tradition.

In a statement announcing the appointments, Mr. de Klerk said they reflected "a new and election-oriented phase in the political process." The first universal elections are expected by April 1994.

The men named in the shuffle were Jacobus A. Rabie, the National Party leader in the mixed-race chamber of parliament, to be minister of population development; Abe Williams, a former rugby official and member of Parliament, to be minister of sport; and an Indian lawyer, Bhadra Ranchod, who is not affiliated with any political party, to oversee tourism.

MONDAY, FEBRUARY 22, 1993

The New York Times

Convoy Finally Reaches Besieged Bosnian Town

By JOHN F. BURNS
Special to The New York Times

SARAJEVO, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Feb. 21 — A week after it set out from a United Nations depot barely 200 miles away, a convoy of relief supplies arrived today at a besieged Muslim enclave in eastern Bosnia, effectively ending the latest crisis in the effort to keep 1.6 million Bosnians from starving while their country is torn apart by war.

The senior relief official with the convoy, Larry Hollingworth, radioed United Nations headquarters in Sarajevo to report that about 150 villagers lining the road into the mountain community of Zepa applauded as the convoy pulled in with 65 tons of food and medical supplies. The convoy was only the second to reach Zepa in nearly 11 months of war, and the supplies it carried constituted a bonanza of sorts for 30,000 residents who have survived a Serbian siege partly by making bread from straw.

For the United Nations, completing a delivery in eastern Bosnia had become a bellwether for the entire billion-dollar relief operation.

The enterprise has been harassed by the warring armies from the start, and its failures were most apparent in eastern Bosnia, the first and most brutally affected area to be subjected to Serbian "ethnic cleansing," which has left more than a million Muslims homeless.

A Make-or-Break Issue

For nearly a year, Serbian nationalist forces have done everything possible to prevent convoys of food reaching three pockets of predominantly Muslim residents, apparently hoping to starve the 200,000 Muslims there into joining the exodus.

Ten days ago, the Muslim-led Government decided to make the plight of eastern Bosnia a make-or-break issue in its relationship with the United Nations: it announced it was halting all further aid deliveries to Sarajevo, where 380,000 people survive largely on United Nations food, saying the capital would starve itself if the United Nations could not push convoys through.

A TENNIS PLAYER'S CONSTANT WORRY

Goran Ivanisevic, a native of Croatia and the No. 5-ranked player in the world, cannot block out his homeland's problems. SportsMonday, C1.

For United Nations officials here and in New York, and for the Government, one convoy became a paradigm: the one that set out Monday from a United Nations depot in Belgrade, the capital of Serbia, for Gorazde, another besieged Muslim community in eastern Bosnia.

But this convoy, like so many others, was halted repeatedly at Serbian checkpoints and at one point was turned back altogether. Finally personal intervention by the United Nations commander, Lieut. Gen. Phillippe Morillon of France, with Serbian nationalist leaders produced an agreement to allow the convoy to pass.

But the convoy no sooner left Rogatica, a Serbian-held town where a community of 13,000 Muslims has been reduced to barely 900, than it found its way blocked by a vast crater in the road. When a French combat engineering team arrived 36 hours later, its bulldozer hit a land mine and the convoy was put on hold again.

10 Trucks Reach Enclave

Finally, this afternoon, after French engineers had helped clear land mines, fallen trees and other obstructions from the road into Zepa and after taking three hours to cover the last seven miles, all 10 trucks reached the Muslim enclave.

President Alija Izetbegovic had already indicated that the Government would allow the United Nations to resume food supplies to Sarajevo. The Western military airlift into Sarajevo is expected to resume as early as Tuesday.

Anthony Land, the Briton who heads United Nations relief operations in Sarajevo, acknowledged that getting a single convoy through to Zepa was mainly symbolic.

But even symbolism has its weight. A prospect that has haunted many United Nations officials here is that the Security Council might move beyond peacekeeping and authorize military escorts with food convoys to shoot their way through to their destinations.

General Morillon has said that the use of force by outside armies would lead to a protracted war.

Mr. Land expressed the hope that the Zepa convoy was a turning point. "We have to hope that it's the beginning of a trend to deliver aid when and where it's needed," he said.

The New York Times

In Zepa, a convoy arrived with 65 tons of food and medicine.

Revival for Party Line on Soviet Coup

By CELESTINE BOHLEN
Special to The New York Times

MOSCOW, Feb. 21 — With two months to go before he and 11 co-defendants stand trial on charges of high treason for their role in the hard-line Communist coup in August 1991, Anatoly I. Lukyanov is not entertaining second thoughts.

When not helping the old Communist Party struggle to its feet, the wily and versatile former chairman of the Soviet Parliament, which is now defunct, has been polishing off a new cycle of sonnets, while awaiting publication of a more prosaic work, "The Coup — Fake and Real."

In interviews since their release from prison over the last two months, Mr. Lukyanov and his fellow defendants have thrust themselves back into the public consciousness, arguing that the country would be better off if they had succeeded in seizing power.

'A Desperate Attempt'

Sitting in his spacious five-room apartment, Mr. Lukyanov knocked back the very idea of a conspiracy, a coup or a putsch as it is called here. It was none of these things, he said.

"It was a desperate attempt to defend the constitutional system, the social system from another coup that was just beginning then, and ended in December with the destruction of the Soviet Union," he said. "That was the real coup."

Like others charged in the case, Mr. Lukyanov has challenged former President Mikhail S. Gorbachev's assertion that he was forcibly isolated at his Crimean villa during the coup. "I can say that Gorbachev had all the opportunities to prevent the introduction of the state of emergency," he said.

Although most of the Soviet President's phone lines were cut, two remained open long enough for members of his staff to call home to their families, Mr. Lukyanov told a Russian television interviewer recently. In addition, a satellite line installed in the presidential limousine was in service throughout the coup, he said.

'Nothing Was Done'

But Mr. Lukyanov's main assertion is that Mr. Gorbachev could have flown back to Moscow with the delegation of coup plotters, who had come to tell him of their intentions and seek his support.

Although Mr. Gorbachev did not join in the conspiracy, he did nothing to get in its way, Mr. Lukyanov said. "Nothing was done at that moment and, yet, everything could have been easily stopped," he said.

Mr. Lukyanov was not a member of the State Emergency Committee, which began the clumsy conspiracy to seize power on the evening of Aug. 18, 1991. He was summoned that evening from his vacation dacha by its members — who included Prime Minister Valentin S. Pavlov, Defense Minister Dmitri T. Yazov and the K.G.B. chief Vladimir A. Kryuchkov — but he refused to endorse their plan of action without the sanction of the Soviet Parliament. Nor, however, did he do anything that night to do stop the conspiracy that was already under way.

Otto Pohl for The New York Times

Anatoly I. Lukyanov, who was involved in the 1991 hard-line Communist coup, in Moscow as he awaits his trial for treason.

"I have always sympathized and I still do with the aspirations of the G.K.Ch.P. members to retain the union, our constitutional system, to prevent the country from sliding into a deeper crisis," he said, referring to the State Emergency Committee by its initials in Russian. "But I was against violations of the law in that situation, against the curfew and against the ridiculous and unnecessary tanks."

'The Worst Possible Moment'

"One thing I can say is that they did not have any serious plan," he said. "They chose the worst possible moment because it was soon after the election of the Russian President." The euphoria of that first test of Russian democracy, which took place in June, had still not worn off, Mr. Lukyanov said, and people still had hopes that "thanks to the market, by just one big leap over the abyss, well-being could be achieved."

Because he disassociated himself from the committee, Mr. Lukyanov's case will be one of the more difficult for Russia's chief prosecutor, Valentin Stepankov, to prove. The case is scheduled to go to the Russian Supreme Court's Military Collegium on April 14.

But given the political mood in Russia today, many believe the coup trial could turn into a political liability for President Boris N. Yeltsin and his Government. In recent months, Mr. Yeltsin, the hero of the resistance against the coup, has been badly weakened by a rising tide that has drawn strength from the public's weariness with soaring inflation, crime and corruption, and unending political feuds.

A recent poll, taken by The Times Mirror Center in November among 1,000 Russians, found that 51 percent favored a strong leader, compared with 39 percent about 17 months ago. Distrust in politics has risen sharply and the number of people who give Mr. Yeltsin a very or mostly favorable rating dropped to 54 percent in November from 85 percent in September 1991.

Providing a Reminder

Into this atmosphere of uncertainty and gloom have burst the "putschists," the last of whom were released last month from Sailors Rest, the Moscow prison where they had been held since their arrest. In interviews and excerpts from coming books, the coup plotters have been reminding Russians of what they have lost since the coup: a country that was both powerful and stable, where prices were fixed, authority was respected and unruly elements were kept in their place.

Mr. Lukyanov predicts a backlash from a people stunned into apathy by rapid change. "Now people are missing dozens of things that they were used to," he said, from free kindergartens and summer camps to guaranteed employment. "Before, it was all abstract. Now they are starting to feel it."

He added, "A year ago, you wouldn't meet so many beggars in the underpasses in Moscow, and we did not have the corruption and crime, and bribe-taking on such a grand scale."

As for the thousands who rallied to Mr. Yeltsin's call in August 1991, and stood outside the Russian Parliament to resist an assault that never came, Mr. Lukyanov said, "Now they know what kind of democracy has come."

Tajik Forces Report Retaking Bases From Islamic Militants

MOSCOW, Feb. 21 (Reuters) — Government forces in Tajikistan have captured three strongholds of the militant Islamic opposition in the central region of the former Soviet republic, a security official was quoted today as saying.

A local journalist quoted the official as saying paratroopers flew by helicopter Saturday into Komsomolabad, Navabad and Garm. They captured the first two without serious resistance and took control of Garm after fierce fighting, the official was quoted as saying, without referring to any casualty figures.

Security officials said last week that 700 to 800 armed rebels and about 200 Afghan fighters controlled Garm.

Sweden Charges Air Hijacker

STOCKHOLM, Feb. 21 (Reuters) — An Azerbaijani man who hijacked a Russian plane to Stockholm, hoping to take his wife and child to New York, was charged with air piracy today, as was his wife, a court official said.

The man, who was armed with two hand grenades and had threatened to kill himself and all 80 passengers and crew members, surrendered to the police Saturday night after five hours of negotiations on the airport runway.

"I would have had to use 50 to 100 months of pay checks to buy a ticket to the United States," he told the court.

[The couple were identified as Tamerlane Musayev, 27, and his wife, Marina, 26, The Associated Press reported.]

The hijacking began when the man seized control of the Aeroflot Tupolev-134 jet airliner between the Siberian city of Tyumèn and St. Petersburg. He allowed the plane to stop for refueling in Tallinn, Estonia, where some passengers disembarked, before it flew on to Stockholm, its second and last stop. His wife said their 8-month-old child was ill, , passengers told Swedish aviation officials.

"The most likely scenerio is that the Russian Embassy asks for extradition, and the Swedish Government would then take a decision on the request," an immigration official, Erik Lempert, said. "It could take some four weeks before Swedish authorities make a final decision."

U.S. Bars Visas for Children Of Colombia Drug Trafficker

BOGOTÁ, Colombia, Feb. 21 (Reuters) — The fugitive drug trafficker Pablo Escobar will have to visit the United States Embassy in Bogotá if he wants his two children to be able to enter the United States, an Embassy spokesman said today.

On Saturday the Embassy announced that it had revoked their visas. The day before Colombian officers had prevented Mr. Escobar's wife, María Victoria, and their son and daughter from boarding a flight to Miami because the children did not have their father's permission to leave.

An Embassy official said today that the visas for the children, Juan, 16, and his younger sister, Manuela, had been renewed about three times.

The army and the police have been searching for Mr. Escobar, head of the Medellín drug cartel, since he escaped from jail in July.

Mobutu in Monaco

MONACO, Feb. 21 (AP) — Accompanied by more than a dozen bodyguards in a four-car motorcade, President Mobutu Sese Seko of Zaire visited his dentist in Monaco today. Mr. Mobutu, under increasing Western pressure to resign and yield power to a transitional government, arrived Friday in southern France and has been staying in his villa at Roquebrune-Cap-Martin, on the Côte d'Azur. He is expected to return to Zaire by Tuesday, the Zairian Embassy in Paris said.

Mozambique's Outlook Brightens As Truce Holds and Drought Ends

By BILL KELLER
Special to The New York Times

TETE, Mozambique — On a continent of withered promise, where country after country has defeated recent dreams of creating civil order out of chronic chaos, Mozambique has unexpectedly emerged as a candidate for an African success story.

When a cease-fire was signed in October few expected it would end this country's savagely indiscriminate 16-year war, but it has held for months. A ruthless drought that had aid donors touting Mozambique as the next Somalia has been broken by quenching rains, and the country is carpeted with corn.

Peace Plus Rain

Here in the fertile northwest, refugees who fled the insurgent Mozambique National Resistance, or Renamo, are streaming home from border camps in Malawi and rebuilding the cane huts burned by the rebels. In other regions, food and medicine are reaching villagers isolated for many years behind guerrilla battle lines.

"We've got a combination of peace and rain, which there hasn't been in Mozambique for a quarter of a century," marveled Arthur M. Hussey 3d, coordinator of relief deliveries for CARE.

Mozambicans from President Joaquim Chissano down to the resettled peasants and dormant warriors describe a universal weariness of war. Foreign donors and diplomats speak of Mozambique with an optimism that surprises them, as a place where the West's post-cold-war ambition of playing midwife to new democracies stands a chance of being fulfilled.

Other Crises Distract

The greatest danger now to Mozambique's tranquillity, almost everyone agrees, is Mozambique's tranquillity.

Lacking scenes of carnage and starvation to disturb Western television audiences, Mozambique is having trouble competing for attention with Somalia and the former Yugoslavia.

As a result, the dispatch of United Nations peacekeeping troops, which is a prerequisite for disarming the rivals, merging them into a new national army and moving toward elections, has fallen far behind schedule.

Some fear the cease-fire faces a serious test in March, when the new crop comes in and Renamo, which was drawn to the peace table in part by hunger, is no longer dependent on foreign handouts.

"Delay is a big danger, of course," President Chissano said in an interview at his oceanside residence in Maputo, the capital. "The soldiers and the Renamo fighters are in the countryside with their arms in hand. They are doing almost nothing, they are waiting to be fed. They can get annoyed."

Aldo Ajello, the United Nations special representative in Mozambique, said he hoped the demobilization of the rival forces could begin in April. The country's first elections, once planned for October, are now tentatively scheduled for June or July of 1994.

Mr. Ajello said his superiors in New York, who have more than enough troops volunteered for policing duty in Somalia, have had trouble finding countries interested in dispatching peacekeepers to Mozambique. The reasons, he said, are obvious:

"Nobody is dying. Nobody is starving. We are not on CNN."

The War

In Ravaged Nation, Countless Dead

To Mozambicans, almost continually at war since 1964, it seemed the dying and starving would never end.

It took 10 years of insurrection to dislodge the Portugese colonialists, who abandoned the country in 1975, looting and sabotaging as they fled. The next year, with a Soviet-backed Marxist Government struggling to find its feet, Renamo was born.

The guerrilla group had its origins in a loose militia recruited by Portuguese industrialists to protect their interests during the war of independence.

This motley band was later adopted by the intelligence service of white-ruled Rhodesia as a tool for destabilizing the Mozambican Government, which provided sanctuary for black Rhodesian insurgents. After blacks won control of Rhodesia (renaming it Zimbabwe), South Africa took over as Renamo's sponsor.

The guerrillas, who proclaimed themselves anti-Communists, waged a scorched-earth war aimed at destroying any sign of Government-sponsored progress. They burned clinics by the hundreds, schools by the thousands. They mined and ambushed along Mozambique's transport corridors, blowing food convoys off the roads with bazookas and immobilizing the ports and railroads that were one of Mozambique's few sources of foreign earnings..

Those who lived under Renamo control tell of massacres and mutilations, rapes and forced labor, and everywhere the kidnapping of children for training as soldiers.

By the late 1980's Renamo had lost its foreign patrons, and the Government had abandoned Communism for a version of free-market pragmatism. But the war raged on.

Of Mozambique's 15 million people, it is estimated that up to one million died, that 1.5 million fled to squalid refugee camps in a half-dozen neighboring countries, and that perhaps 3 million more were driven from their villages into overcrowded towns and cities.

Over the last two years, the misery was compounded by southern Africa's worst drought of the century.

When President Chissano and the rebel leader, Afonso Dhlakama, signed their peace accord last October after two years of international pressure, there was little confidence that either man could deliver what he promised.

Renamo was widely regarded as an uncontrollable gang of young thugs, and Government soldiers were badly demoralized, prone to looting sprees and occasional terrorism. Anarchy seemed the more probable fate of this hungry and gun-saturated land.

The Peace

Paralyzed Country Is Stirring Again

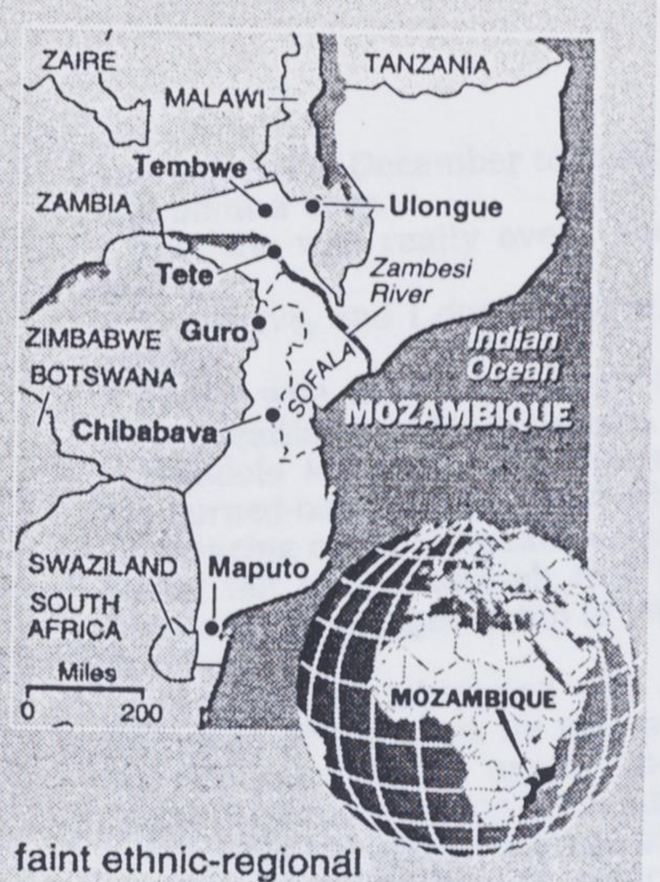
The most immediate sign of normalcy is that Mozambique, long paralyzed, is moving.

Relief workers who relied on remote landing strips for their deliveries in Renamo areas now dispatch aid convoys on the highways. Diplomats and journalists who had hunkered down in Maputo now explore the country by road. Sun-worshipers mosey up the coast from Maputo for the more secluded Indian Ocean beaches.

Cities that had swollen with hungry and fearful peasants are now spilling their crowds back into the countryside, and those trapped for years behind Renamo lines have been allowed to leave, emerging with malnutrition, dis-

Mozambique at a Glance

HISTORY: Portugal colonized the Indian Ocean coast in the late 15th century, but inland principalities remained autonomous until the early 20th century. In the intervening years the area was an important trading center for gold, ivory and slaves. Mozambique became independent on June 25, 1975, after 10 years of war. The ruling party, the Front for the Liberation of Mozambique (Frelimo) espoused Communism and one-party rule, but it shifted toward free markets and legalized rival parties at end of the 1980's.



ECONOMY: Mainly agricultural, producing cashews, cotton and sugar for export. The ports and railroads are vital corridors for landlocked neighbors.

PEOPLE: Of the estimated 15 million there is no dominant ethnic group, but Makua people are thought to be most numerous. The civil war had a faint ethnic-regional undercurrent, with southern Shangaan disproportionately represented in Government, and Ndau and other groups from the center and north tending to predominate in Renamo.

LAND AREA: 303,769 square miles, about twice the size of California.

The New York Times

ease and tales of terror.

When they showed up at a relief center here, Chassassa Nvunganene, 30, and her three skinny children had walked three days from a Renamo zone in the central province of Sofala. They trudged barefoot, surviving on grasshoppers and roots.

Listlessly she recounted a common litany of sorrows: Renamo captives since 1989, one daughter dead of malaria in a Renamo camp, husband killed by a land mind while hauling food for the guerrillas. Only three months after the cease-fire, she said, did their captors relent.

"Renamo said, 'If you want to go, you can go, we don't have food for you,' " Mrs. Nvunganene said, as her 6-year old son fished a squirming grasshopper from a plastic bag and handed it to his little sister.

Western relief workers say the tide of victims like Mrs. Nvunganene has now subsided to a comparative trickle.

Three months ago, said Felice Dindo, the chief delegate for the International Committee of the Red Cross in Mozambique, "we were seeing people starving and nothing moving."

We were blocked on the roads," he said. Now, "the emergency, we can say, is over, at least in the places we've been able to reach."

This is an important caveat. Relief workers believe that in some Renamo strongholds, especially the valley along the Zambezi River, there are still substantial pockets of hungry people stricken by cholera and other disease, isolated by demolished roads and the estimated two million land mines seeded across the country.

Crews are removing the mines and slowly opening routes into these areas.

When Red Cross workers first penetrated late last year into Chibabava, in central Mozambique, Mr. Dindo said, they were alarmed to find 20,000 fearful squatters jammed into the town and a raging cholera epidemic. Doctors and nurses were rushed in, work crews began digging latrines. But in December they found another way to clear up the problem.

"We distributed seeds in December, and the population was down to 2,000 in a matter of a month," Mr. Dindo said. Everyone went home to plant corn.

The Combatants

The Road Back To Brotherhood

Perhaps the most striking sight on a 400-mile drive along the once perilous roads of north and central Mozambique was the casual foot traffic of Renamo fighters and Government soldiers, some armed and others not, exchanging polite greetings as they passed one another.

"Come here, my brother," yelled Tembo Beachane, a Government soldier, hailing a Renamo guerrilla to meet visiting reporters in the market town of Guro.

The guerrilla, Josias Mbaula, had trudged for two days in his knee-high rubber boots to mail letters in Guro and was now meandering back to base, an AK-47 assault rifle strung over his shoulder. A guerrilla for 13 of his 33 years, six times wounded, he now chattered amiably about the peace.

"I fought, I finished, and I am happy," he declared, and like every other combatant interviewed along the route he predicted an easy reconciliation. Gesturing at Mr. Beachane, he said, "We will understand each other because we belong to the same family."

Asked when he would surrender his weapon, and what he wanted to do next, the Renamo man answered automatically, as did almost every Renamo fighter to whom the question was put:

"For me, everything depends on what they tell me to do."

Western peacekeepers who have been surveying the military situation in Mozambique in preparation for demobilization said this answer was typical, and reassuring. It suggests that Renamo is under much tigher control than previously supposed, and thus likely to disarm when ordered.

Indeed, United Nations officials and diplomats said, the guerrillas appear far better disciplined than the disgruntled army.

The plan mapped out by the United Nations calls for fighters — an estimated 20,000 from Renamo, perhaps 70,000 Government forces — to be mustered at 49 assembly points policed by international troops.

After registering, turning in their weapons, and getting medical checkups, they will be issued civilian clothes and money. Some will be sent for training as soldiers in the new national army, to be composed of 15,000 men from each side, and the rest returned to their homes.

The object is to avoid the mistakes of Angola, where Western peacemakers pushed for elections before the combatants had been disarmed. Angolan rebels refused to accept their electoral defeat in September, and the renewed fighting has pushed that country to the brink of collapse.

In Mozambique, the Security Council has approved a $330 million budget for a peacekeeping force of about 7,500 troops, but Mr. Ajello, the United Nations representative, said that the budget had been stalled in bureaucracy and that member countries had shown little enthusiasm for sending soldiers.

After much lobbying the United Nations has offers of troops from Italy, Uruguay, Bangladesh, Zambia, Botswana and India, but no country has offered the engineering and logistics units needed to rebuild roads and supply the demobilization centers, he said.

Even so, officials here agree the immediate danger is escalating banditry

by restive soldiers, not the resumption of war.

"We are prepared to wait for a little while," said Vincente Z. Ululu, the general secretary of Renamo, after complaining of the delays. "We want everything to be fixed properly so we do not have the same mistake like in Angola."

The Refugees

Voting for Peace With Their Feet

Flying low out of Tete, north toward the jutting mountains of Malawi, a pilot points out the fresh-plaited roofs and green cornstalks of new settlements that were not there last October. This is the district called Angonia, and these are the homes of returned refugees, voting with their feet for peace.

In Ulongue, the district capital of Angonia, the district administrator rattled off the estimates of returnees. In October 1,472. In November 9,228. In December 33,184. In January, when the rain slowed them, 31,530.

The administrator, Evaristo Wezulo, said two-thirds of Angonia's prewar population of 159,000 had fled. Most have already come home. Those who remain behind, relief workers say, are wives and children subsisting on refugee-camp ration cards until the first harvest at home, or children finishing the Malawi school year.

Salvatore Ippolito, who oversees United Nations refugee relief efforts from Tete, said the return was spontaneous and unexpected.

"The peace agreement surprised us," he said. "It worked so fast and so well."

Among the refugees themselves, confidence in the peace depends on how recently they have arrived.

Those fresh from the border, like Maria Viriato, were dubious. Juggling her infant son and a bundle of live chickens, Mrs. Viriato made her way along the road from the border toward her village, Tembwe, laid waste by Renamo in 1987. Her husband had come ahead in December to build a hut and plant a crop.

Was the war really over? she was asked.

"I believe, and I don't believe," she replied.

Those who have been back longer were steadier in their optimism.

Wizidolo Kabango, who returned to his burned-out village in November after hearing about the peace on Malawi radio, felt secure enough that he returned to the refugee camp to fetch his furniture.

With a tiny table and two chairs balanced on his head, he was walking the 15 miles home again, "because there is no more war in Mozambique."

Angonia has the advantage of being fertile and accessible. In other, more devastated regions bordering the southern tip of Malawi, few refugees have gone home because there is no relief lifeline yet to supply them with seeds or to feed them while they plant their first crop.

Mr. Ippolito said that as soon as roads were opened into other areas and seed distributed, donors would gradually cut off rations in Malawi to encourage the rest of Mozambique's displaced to go home.

The Outlook

With Passion Spent, Time for Politics

"Last year we were comparing Mozambique to Somalia," said Felice Dindo of the Red Cross. "This year we were comparing it to Angola." As it happens, Mr. Dindo and others agree, Mozambique is neither, and that may be its salvation.

Unlike Somalia, Mozambique has a functioning Government, and is naturally fertile. Unlike Angola, Mozambique seems to have spent its passions, and to be ready to move to the nonlethal combat of politics.

It is too early to say how robust the new democracy will be. Several opposition parties are functioning, but they are penniless and, except for Renamo's political wing, largely unknown. In the countryside, few people have heard about the plans for elections.

Almost everyone assumes the ruling party, Frelimo, will win the first elections by default. Renamo leaders say they would accept that outcome, if the elections are fair, and foreign observers here tend to believe them.

Among the civilians brutalized by the war, there is lack of vengefulness that is astonishing to an outsider. Some educated Mozambicans attribute it to fatalism, others to the ancient southern African tradition that vanquished enemies are incorporated into the tribe, and still others to a talent for postponing vengeance.

Perhaps it is simply fatigue with a war that people say made no sense to them. Time and again, victims almost shrugged off their suffering, blaming not Renamo or the Government but "the war."

Although Mozambique's calamity has eased, it is still a long way from the "prosperidade" promised on the Government's New Year billboards in Maputo.

"We will need aid, in terms of food and other aid, for some years to come," said President Chissano. With regular rains, he estimates, the country can again be self-sufficient in food within three years. "This will consolidate the peace."

Manuel Lopes da Costa, the Portuguese Ambassador in Maputo, said Mozambique could expect a quick infusion of income from the reopening of the railroads and ports, and from the sale of energy from a power plant idled by the war.

"I would not be surprised if in two or three years the need in Mozambique will be reduced to one-third of what it is now," Mr. Lopes da Costa said. "I would not be surprised if in a decade Mozambique would be a perfectly viable nation."

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Put American Troops in Macedonia

By Walter Russell Mead

NEW ORLEANS

So far, Washington's Balkan policy has been built on principles of bluster and bluff. Speak loudly, but leave the stick at home.

The Serbian leaders, says the U.S., are war criminals who should all be brought to trial. The Vance-Owen peace plan, which brings those same Serbs to the negotiating table, was derided by Americans eager to take a stronger stand. The Europeans who backed it were pusillanimous, we said. The Vance-Owen plan rewarded aggression, we said.

It was all very exhilarating and all very true. But it was all empty bombast as well. When push came to shove, the U.S. had no alternative to Vance-Owen and fell humbly, humiliatingly in line with the spineless Europeans and their appeasement of war criminals.

The double-minded man is unstable in all his ways, warns the Bible. It would be hard to find a better description of American policy in the former Yugoslavia. The U.S. has two paramount goals: it wants to stop ethnic cleansing, and it wants to stay out of the war. These goals are moral, they are prudent and, if achieved, they advance the national interest. They are also incompatible, and the contradiction between these irreconcilable and but non-negotiable objectives has plunged the Balkan policy of the last two Administrations into sordid and wretched chaos.

If this were the end of the story, we could live with it. There have been bad peace treaties before, and harsh bargains with evil leaders — worse proposals than Vance-Owen. And there have been bigger diplomatic blunders than the fiasco launched under the Bush Administration by Lawrence Eagleburger and continued by Secretary of State Warren Christopher.

Unfortunately, the Balkan tragedy has two or three more acts to come, and American braggadocio — the mixture of bluster and cowardice that still guides our policy — is the policy most likely to widen the war.

Even as Washington caved in by accepting the basic outline of the peace plan, the U.S. was preparing for new crises down the road. Some peace plan! Mr. Christopher's statement on the Vance-Owen proposal included not only a surrender on Bosnia by ratifying Serbian territorial conquests but new threats to Serbia, lest it move into the neighboring republic of Macedonia and into the Serbian province of Kosovo, where restive ethnic Albanians are likely targets for a new round of brutal ethnic cleansing.

The combination of brave words and craven deeds is unlikely to impress the Serbian warlords in whose bloody hands the chances for peace now rest. The West talked big but did little over Croatia. It huffed and puffed over Bosnia but did nothing. Now it is on its high horse over Kosovo. The U.S. looks imposing but like a scarecrow it never moves, and the Serbs have figured that out.

It all seems sadly ridiculuous, but it's worse than that. The U.S. has interests in the Balkans important enough to fight for and that will, if challenged, drag a reluctant nation into a new and nasty not-so-little war. Ethnic cleansing in Kosovo is likely to provoke war with Albania and destabilization in Macedonia, where there are also large and restless Serb and Albanian communities. Neither Bulgaria nor Greece could easily stay neutral if the war spreads to Macedonia, and, in a worst-case scenario, Turkey could find itself drawn in as well.

Send Serbia a tough message without provoking war.

The U.S. could not finesse this situation. A war that puts Greece and Turkey on opposite sides would break up NATO and seriously strain the U.S.-European relationship and the already-frayed European Community. The U.S. and Germany would almost certainly tilt toward Turkey; Britain and France would probably support the Greeks — and so might the Russians.

The prevention of this wider Balkan war is the vital interest that should shape American policy. The U.S. needs to stop the Serbs where they are, but it does not need to roll them back. To do that, we must convince them that further attacks would mean war. This won't beeasy after so many false warnings.

Walter Russell Mead, a senior counselor at the World Policy Institute, is writing a book on U.S. foreign policy for the Twentieth Century Fund.

Sending peacekeeping troops to Bosnia is the most likely form of U.S. military intervention at this stage. Unfortunately, it is the least satisfactory approach. American peacekeeping troops there would become hostages to events in Kosovo and Macedonia. Just as Britain and France opposed the enforcement of the "no fly" zone over Bosnia because of the risk to their peacekeeping troops, the U.S. would have to take the safety of its Bosnian peacekeepers into account when responding to Serbian aggression in neighboring republics.

The best solution — radical-sounding but on balance the most prudent course — would put American troops where they might still preserve the peace: Macedonia. With or without formal recognition of the ex-Yugoslav republic, a temporary dispatch of at least 50,000 troops — preferably multinational but in any case including a large proportion of well-equipped Americans — would send a tough message to Serbia without provoking war.

Unlike peacekeepers in Bosnia, these troops would not come under hostile fire; they would defend the independence and territorial integrity of a country that the U.S. very much needs to preserve. The multilateral force would also be authorized to protect the Albanian majority in Kosovo from Serbian attack. Without firing a shot, these troops would significantly reduce the chance that the Yugoslav war would widen, and they would introduce a new note of realism into Serbia's distracted councils.

But even if fighting spreads to Macedonia, the multilateral presence will help avoid the worst: splitting our most important alliance and straining our relationships with every important country in Europe and the Middle East.

This military policy needs a diplomatic strategy to succeed. The U.S. should win British, French and Greek support for the peacekeeping mission. Washington should also develop with the Russians a peace program that the Serbs can accept. At the same time, the signal to Serbia should be softer.

Instead of talking about Nazi-type war trials, which the U.N. Security Council is expected to vote for this week, the United Nations and Washington should be talking about regional reconstruction and the benefits of cooperation. It may go against the grain to let criminals go unpunished, but no major country has any intention of dismantling the Serbian Government by force and arresting its leaders. Nor, realistically, is the world ready for a prolonged boycott of Serbia that would destabilize the region even further and prevent any chance for future prosperity.

Our Balkan policy is too important to be based on illusions. No lasting peace is possible without Serbian participation, and as long as the Serbs do not widen the war, the U.S. has nothing to gain and much to lose from a prolonged quarrel with Belgrade.

Clear thinking and decisive action — for a change — represent the only hope for a relatively safe path through the minefield. Otherwise, we are likely to be bloodied and humiliated by the most dangerous European crisis in 50 years. □

FINANCIAL TIMES

Government buys time until snow melts

HAVING quieted its civil war, the ex-Soviet Tajikistan government is trying to arrest the republic's devastating economic decline, and exploit its oil, gold and cotton.

But success is far from assured, hinging on whether Islamic-dominated opposition forces, now trapped behind deep winter snows, will regroup in the spring.

In a promising region with largely untapped natural gas and oil reserves, the ramifications of new fighting go far – Russian President Boris Yeltsin and Tajikistan's neighbours are more worried than ever that instability will spill over their borders.

The chief source of their anxiety is the presence of thousands of Tajik fighters in rebel training camps in Afghanistan, who are expected to try to return home in the spring. Already, hundreds of fighters and thousands of arms have come over the border.

Against this backdrop, Mr Imamali Rakhmanov, the Tajik leader, is leading a Commonwealth of Independent States' effort to hold the line against upheaval in otherwise quiet, conservative Central Asia. His Commonwealth allies are providing prodigious military assistance.

"If we manage to seal the border and stop the weapons coming from Afghanistan for one or two months," Mr Rakhmanov said, "we'll be able to manage our other problems."

Two years ago, rigid communism in Tajikistan began to give way to a democratic and Islamic state. But a year ago the Soviet Union collapsed, and in its poorest republic a series of coups, counter-coups and civil war ensued. The trouble shattered the nation of 5m people, tucked between China, Afghanistan and Uzbekistan. About 7 per cent of the population, or 350,000 people, were displaced, with about a quarter of them fleeing to Afghanistan.

In November, the tide turned. The old-guard Soviet leadership reasserted itself, crushed its Islamic-dominated enemies, and by December retook power in the capital of Dushanbe. Today, the civil war is calmed, and the government is conducting operations to try to finish off its opponents.

Assistance has been provided by those who, like Tajikistan's old communists, have the most to gain. Both Uzbekistan and Russia deny any combat role in Tajikistan. But military officials, diplomats and independent foreign observers, say both republics have been on the front line with Tajik forces.

Mr Rakhmanov considers the Tajik opposition forces the greatest threat to his government's efforts to reverse an economic decline that, next to Armenia's, is the ex-Soviet Union's worst.

The year of fighting prevented the harvest of 70 per cent of the 1992-93 cotton crop, or 600,000 tonnes, costing a potential $200m (£138m) in foreign exchange, according to the government. The instability, plus a shortage of material and spare parts, reduced aluminium production in the last year by one-third, to 340,000 tonnes from the expected output of 500,000 tonnes; which cost Tajikistan $170m in potential foreign exchange. Wheat was not planted at all in the autumn, and light industry closed down entirely eight months ago in southern Tajikistan. Mr Rakhmanov, however, talks of building up a prosperous republic.

The first foreign deal has been with the American company Kerry Energy. Kerry has won a $32m contract to refurbish oil wells and build a refinery in Tajikistan's industrial north, between Kenibadan and Isfaran. The deal is meant to restore Tajikistan's Soviet-era oil production of 400m tonnes a year, from its current output of 40m tonnes, and then to develop new reserves.

Much of the rest still must be proven. Satellite photographs indicate other oil and natural gas deposits in southern Tajikistan, Mr Rakhmanov said, and silver deposits are also being explored. Iron ore has been found in Leninabad – one field contains 60m tonnes – and gold deposits are being examined at Penjikent. Tajikistan also plans to plant an additional 1.6m hectares to cotton.

However, few people believe that anyone can seal the porous border with Afghanistan. and most observers expect the war to rage again in the spring. Still, Mr Rakhmanov – and his Commonwealth allies – plan to try.