

Serbs Shun Discussion Of Atrocities

By MICHAEL DOBBS
Washington Post Staff Writer

BELGRADE, June 23—Determined to circumvent the information blockade over what was happening to ethnic Albanians in Kosovo, Serbian human rights activist Natasha Kandic decided to mount her own one-woman investigation. Last month, she traveled to the town of Pec in western Kosovo, scene of some of the cruelest atrocities reported there, and found evidence of a grave containing the bodies of 44 ethnic Albanians.

When she returned to Belgrade and tried to describe what she had seen, few people were interested. Her neighbors and friends preferred to talk about the disruption to water and electrical service caused by NATO bombing. Newspapers and newsmagazines normally critical of Yugoslav President Slobodan Milosevic refused to publish her eyewitness report from Kosovo.

"When I tried to talk about what I had seen and experienced, people would get impatient and change the subject," said Kandic, who heads the privately funded Humanitarian

Law Fund in Belgrade. "It's as if people here simply don't want to know the truth about what happened in Kosovo. Even the intellectuals are under the influence of official propaganda."

Over the last two weeks, as foreign reporters have finally gained access to the killing fields of Kosovo, television viewers and newspaper readers all over the world have been given horrifying accounts of the violence committed by Yugoslav and Serbian forces on the ethnic Albanian population. But here in Serbia, there has been little public discussion of atrocities and no substantive reporting on the subject by the heavily censored news media.

An opinion poll published last week in the Belgrade newsmagazine *Nin* reported that 64 percent of Serbs do not believe reports in Western news media of atrocities by Serb-led government forces against ethnic Albanians in Kosovo, a province of Serbia. Just over 14 percent of the population believes that atrocities were committed, while 15 percent think that the allegations may be partially true.

"It's all propaganda," said Tomislav Zekic, a political science student out for a walk with his family in Belgrade. "Your TV is as bad as our TV." After dismissing the talk of Serbian atrocities as the product of Western media manipulation, he added that he came from Kosovo and that, in his view, "the only good Albanian is a dead Albanian."

*file Serbia
see attached photo*

Even those Serbs who are inclined to believe many of the accusations leveled against government security forces in Kosovo tend to search for exculpation, such as the argument that dirty things happen in war and all sides are guilty. They find it difficult to draw a moral distinction between Serbian militiamen machine-gunning a column of ethnic Albanian refugees during an attack on separatist rebels in the province and NATO's dropping bombs on Serbian civilians during an effort to destroy Milosevic's war-making capacity.

"If these things really happened in Kosovo, then our leaders are criminals," said Vladen Videnovic, 17, a

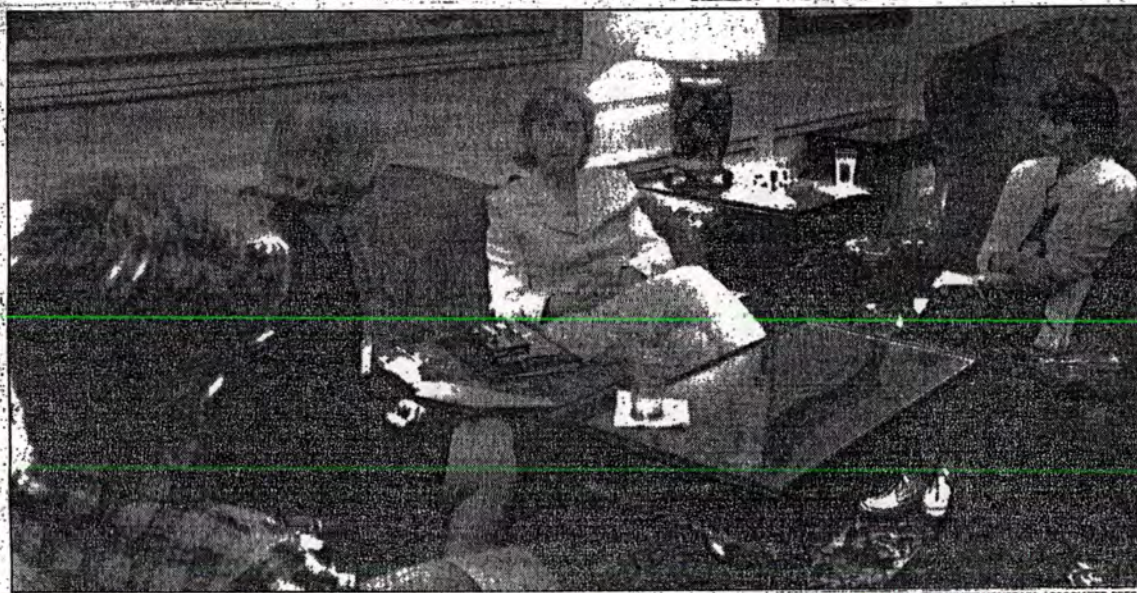
student in the southern Serbian city of Nis. "But Milosevic is not the only one who is guilty; Clinton also deserves to be put on trial."

Nis was the scene of cluster-bomb attacks by NATO warplanes on May 7 and May 12 that killed 15 people in the center of the city, including a 27-year-old woman named Ljiljana Spasic who was in her seventh month of pregnancy. Composed of hundreds of bomblets that drop to the ground in miniature parachutes, cluster bombs are designed to kill as many people as possible and are usually used against troop concentrations.

City officials argue that the use of such bombs in broad daylight against civilians was a deliberate attempt by NATO to terrorize the population of Nis and thus increase the political pressure on Milosevic to agree to Western demands over Kosovo. NATO spokesmen insist that the attack on the city center was a mistake and that the real target was the airport, several miles away.

Nis Mayor Zoran Zivkovic is a leader of the opposition Democratic Party and a longtime opponent of Milosevic. He says he is revolted by the stories coming out of Kosovo about Serbian atrocities, "but as the mayor of Nis I am even more concerned by the suffering that NATO caused to the people of this town."

Such views are fairly widespread here, even among Serbs otherwise sympathetic to the West. "The West is guilty of double standards," said Rada Djordjevic, a Belgrade physicist, who declared she could no longer bear to watch satellite broadcasts of CNN and Britain's Sky News. "You choose one side in a conflict and look on them as good guys and conclude that everybody else must be



BY BARB KINNEY—THE WHITE HOUSE VIA ASSOCIATED PRESS

Hillary Rodham Clinton, who returned yesterday from a visit to the Balkans, meets at the White House with human rights leaders Aferdita Kelmendi, left, and Vjosa Dobruna, both of Kosovo, and Natasha Kandic, right, of Belgrade.

bad guys. But that is not how it is in real life. In real life, there are good guys and bad guys on both sides."

The Belgrade government has ridiculed Western allegations that up to 10,000 Kosovo Albanian civilians might have been killed by Serbian and Yugoslav forces and accused Western leaders of using the atrocity stories as a pretext for military intervention. Recently, however, there

have been signs that the government here is preparing to distance itself from the bloodletting by making a public example of "rogue" soldiers and police officers who "went crazy" and killed civilians.

"These people have been arrested and will be convicted by the courts," said Goran Matic, a Yugoslav government minister close to Milosevic, in an interview here today. "They do not belong to the Serbian nation but to the nation of criminals." He added that every Yugoslav soldier in Kosovo carried a booklet on "humanitarian law and the rules of war."

Kandic, who has made several trips to Kosovo, attributes the lack of public discussion about war atrocities to lack of information, heavy censorship of the news media and the poisonous influence of the official media, notably state television. "Serbs are just like any other people who have been subjected to a very efficient propaganda," she said.

Other human rights activists believe that there are other factors at work, including a long rivalry between Serbs and ethnic Albanians in Kosovo and a national callousness born of years of deprivation and isolation. "Serbs are an unsentimental people," said Vesna Petrovic of the Belgrade Center for Human Rights. "We do not care about ourselves, let

alone others." She adds that many Serbs, even intellectuals, have a "racist" attitude toward Albanians.

"It took Germany 25 years to come to terms with what they did in World War II. It is going to take us at least that amount of time to examine our actions in Kosovo, Bosnia and other places," Petrovic said.

In theory, the lifting of wartime restrictions later this week will make it possible for the independent news media to report in much more detail about the atrocities in Kosovo than has been possible until now. In practice, however, editors are likely to be very cautious in their treatment of such a controversial subject.

"We must be very cool-headed about this and not allow ourselves to be carried away by emotions," said Filip Svarm, managing editor of the independent weekly Vreme, which is supported by Western democracy advocates, including the Soros Foundation. "I have no doubt that there are a lot of mass graves there, but I also think that part of the responsibility lies with [ethnic Albanian separatist guerrillas]. If we get the details wrong, there will be people here who are only too happy to cast doubt on everything and say 'Look, they are blaming the Serbs for everything.'"

October 22, 1998

Milosevic Crackdown on Independent Media

Background: With assistance from international donors, a vibrant independent media has developed in the FRY over recent years. Independent media are a crucial source of unbiased and unofficial reporting to the population of FRY. This summer, Milosevic launched a renewed attack on free media in the FRY. TV Piroć in eastern Serbia was closed after broadcasting news about anti-war activities in the region. Radio Kontakt, a Kosovar radio station broadcasting messages of ethnic reconciliation, was closed after only five days on the air. City Radio in Nis was closed after receiving U.S.-donated transmission equipment.

Recent Developments: On October 7, the FRY Information Minister imposed a regulation obligating mass media to "safeguard the Republic of Serbia" by barring these media from disseminating foreign programs or articles or other information "directed against the interests of [Serbia] or spreading fear, panic, or defeatism." On October 20, the Serbian parliament passed a restrictive information law which bans the rebroadcasts of international Serbian language programs such as VOA, and imposes heavy fines on violators. FRY authorities have carried out the following actions during the past weeks:

- Belgrade independent daily "Nasa Borba" was closed on October 15.
- Belgrade independent newspaper "Danas" was closed on October 13. Equipment and files were seized and the building was later sealed. Closure was justified by Serb Information Ministry under "Decree on Special Measures in Circumstances of NATO's threats with Military Attacks against our country."
- Independent Belgrade newspaper "Dnevi Telegraf" closed in the same manner the same night under the same decree.
- Radio Index, a Belgrade-based independent station, was closed on October 10.
- Radio Senta in Vojvodina was shut down on October 9.

Responses: We have coordinated the following responses to the crackdown:

- State issued statements on October 9 and October 15 condemning the crackdown;
- We arranged for NATO SG Solana and General Clark to meet with independent media representatives in Belgrade on October 15;
- We promoted a press conference by OSCE Chairman Geremek on October 20 at the Media Center in Belgrade, an important meeting place for independent journalists;
- A strong statement by the White House Press Secretary condemning the new Serbian information law was made on October 21, 1998;
- Our embassy in Belgrade today demarched the FRY Deputy Prime Minister on the closings;
- U.S. Embassies at other capitals have been requested to seek host government approaches for similar approaches to Belgrade;
- Public Affairs Officers have been asked to raise the profile of this issue in European states through contacts with NGOs and other opinion-makers;
- We are working to enhance indigenous radio capabilities in Kosovo;
- We are enhancing indigenous radio broadcast capabilities in the RS and Montenegro, particularly to allow the rebroadcast of VOA and other international programs into Serbia;
- We are taking preliminary steps to bolster the distribution in Serbia of the Montenegrin newspaper *Vijesti*, which has printed columns by journalists from banned papers in Serbia;
- We are supporting other forms of expression by banned Serb journalists, including leafleting and posterings.

THE WHITE HOUSE

Office of the Press Secretary

For Immediate Release

October 21, 1998

STATEMENT BY THE PRESS SECRETARY

The United States condemns the draconian law on Information passed yesterday by the Serbian parliament. This law establishes massive fines on media outlets for failing to publish information the FRY authorities deem important and for carrying foreign programming. It also requires publishers to forward copies of each issue to the public prosecutor and the Ministry of Information. This repressive law follows a series of hostile actions taken against independent media outlets in the FRY over the past weeks, including the closure of newspapers Danas, Dnevi Telegraf, and Nasa Borba and Radio Index in Belgrade, and Radio Senta in Vojvodina.

The government's actions are clearly designed to intimidate Serbia's independent media and to prevent them from reporting the truth about President Milosevic's campaign of repression in Kosovo. Milosevic is also trying to hide from his own people the substantial concessions he has been forced to make under the threat of NATO air strikes. This includes an unprecedented international presence in Kosovo, that until now he had steadfastly resisted, with 2,000 OSCE verifiers on the ground and NATO surveillance in the air.

The United States is committed to promoting free and open media across the globe, including in the FRY. We are actively supporting the courageous work of civil society and independent media organizations in the FRY who are struggling to keep independent media voices alive. We have expanded Voice of America's Serbian and Albanian broadcasts, and have begun broadcasting medium wave transmissions which can be received on AM radios throughout the FRY. We are also utilizing the Internet to enhance the level of information flowing in and out of the country.

In the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, independent radio stations and newspapers have provided valuable perspectives to the population of Yugoslavia about issues which strongly affect these citizens' lives. Without independent media voices, the people of FRY will be less able to make the informed decisions that will determine their future.

The Belgrade leadership should immediately halt its repression of independent media. Developing a vibrant civil society with free and independent media will be a crucial step in building the type of civil society which can return the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia to its place among nations. Unfortunately, the current leadership in Belgrade seems determined to keep that country a pariah and to deny its citizens the benefits of democracy and integration into Europe.