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Hard times in Sarajevo: cold weather comes early to Bosnia's war-torn capital, bringing more hardship, death

Source:

[Current Events, a Weekly Reader publication](#), 94.7 (Oct. 24, 1994): p1. From *General OneFile*.

Document Type:

Article

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SARAJEVO, Bosnia - This month snow fell in the **cold** mountains surrounding **Sarajevo** (sara-AY-voh). And so did hopes for peace.

Bosnian Serb soldiers, who have surrounded **Sarajevo** for more than two years, succeeded last month in cutting off running water, gas, and electricity to the city's suffering people. In order to survive, people now line up with large plastic jugs to get water, then return to their dark, often **cold** homes. With food running short, and with no heat or electricity, the city's 380,000 people, who have already suffered enough for several lifetimes, face especially **hard times**.

Country at War

Sarajevo is the capital of Bosnia and Herzegovina, a country that has been torn apart by the bloodiest fighting in Europe since World War II (1939-45). The war in Bosnia began in 1992, when the country of Yugoslavia, which had been a Communist dictatorship since 1945, broke apart. In March 1992, soon after Bosnia, which had been part of Yugoslavia, declared its independence. Bosnia's three main ethnic groups then took up arms against one another.

Bosnia's main ethnic groups are Muslims, who make up 40 percent of the population; Serbs, who make up 31.4 percent; and Croats (KROH-ats), who make up 17 percent. Each of those groups has its own religion, culture, and way of life - plus a long history of hating the other groups.

The Serbs and Croats began the war because they feared that Bosnia's Muslim-controlled government would persecute them. The Serbs in Bosnia were helped and aided by fellow Serbs in neighboring Serbia. Similarly, the Croats received aid from supporters in Croatia, which borders Bosnia to the north.

People Against People

Most of the fighting has been between Muslims and Serbs. It is a war of people against people, not just army against army. To many Bosnian Serbs, all Muslims are the enemy, including women and children. Many Muslims view the Serbs in much the same way.

"Ethnic cleansing," the process of driving all people of one ethnic group away

from conquered territory, has become a feature of this ethnic war. The world has been shocked to see pictures of children being shot, old people abandoned to die, and people being chased from their homes - all because they belonged to the wrong ethnic group.

Since the Bosnian civil war began, more than 200,000 Bosnians - men, women, and children - have been killed on all sides. Hundreds of thousands more have been wounded, blinded, or crippled. And more than 2 million people, out of a total population of only 4.4 million, have been chased from their homes.

The Bosnian Serbs have achieved the most success. They now control more than 70 percent of Bosnia's territory. Their army now surrounds **Sarajevo** and other major cities.

Peace Plans

But the Muslim government, centered in **Sarajevo**, has not given up. It has been able to gain international support for peace settlements that would keep Muslims in power. A number of peace plans have been proposed by the United States and other countries to end the war in Bosnia. But so far, none has been accepted by all three ethnic groups. The latest peace plan, which would have given the Serbs 49 percent of Bosnia, was rejected by the Serbs in September. The previous peace plan was rejected by the Muslims.

Still, there have been some small gains for peace. No longer do large Serb guns rain down shells on **Sarajevo** from the surrounding hills. Earlier this year, under the threat of NATO (North Atlantic Treaty Organization) air strikes, the Serbs agreed to withdraw their big guns. NATO is a military alliance that includes major European nations and the United States.

The big guns may be gone. But Serb snipers, who still remain in the hills and look for any moving target in the city below, make walking Sarajevo's streets a life-threatening experience.

U.N. Role

The United Nations also is trying to reduce the bloodshed in Bosnia's civil war. More than 9,000 U.N. troops are now in Bosnia to try to keep food, water, and medicine supplied to people suffering from the fighting.

But dealing with the Bosnian Serbs has been tough for U.N. soldiers - especially around **Sarajevo**. Many **times** in the past, the Serbs have agreed to let U.N. relief convoys enter **Sarajevo**, only to back off from such agreements at the last moment.

In September, the Serbs agreed once again to open the roads around **Sarajevo** to U.N. trucks carrying medicine and food. On October 1, however, they stopped 29 of 34 truck convoys going into **Sarajevo**, reportedly in response to a NATO air strike on September 23.

Earlier this month the Serbs also agreed not to try to shoot down U.N. relief

planes landing at Sarajevo's airport. So far, this agreement has held.

On October 5, the U.N. issued a warning that vital food supplies were dwindling in Bosnia, especially in **Sarajevo**, and called upon all nations to help. Powdered milk is expected to run out in **Sarajevo** by November and sugar and salt by December.

Many nations, including the United States, are responding. But everything depends on the Serb army. Will it keep its agreements to allow emergency food and medicine to enter **Sarajevo** and other cities?

U.S. Secretary of Defense William Perry, who visited Bosnia on October 1, has called for NATO to threaten massive air strikes against the Bosnian Serbs if they block relief shipments to **Sarajevo**.

In war-torn Bosnia, the threats go on - and so does the suffering.

BACKGROUND

The tragedy in Bosnia has its roots in the birth - and death - of Yugoslavia. Modern Yugoslavia dates from the end of World War I, in 1918, when a new state rose from the ruins of the Austro-Hungarian empire and its bordering states.

In World War II, Yugoslavia was taken over by the Nazis and occupied by German troops. But the Yugoslavs fought a tough and determined guerrilla war against the occupying Germans. Aided by the country's mountainous terrain, Communist guerrilla leader Tito and his forces held down a number of German divisions, preventing them from joining other German forces fighting in Europe, thus helping the Allies win the war.

Still, Yugoslavia suffered dreadfully during the war - Losing an estimated 10 percent of its entire population.

Tito's iron dictatorship held Yugoslavia together after the war. But after Tito's death in 1980, the country began to fall apart - a process that was swiftly completed with the fall of communism in Europe between 1990 and 1992.

Outwardly, it is **hard** for an American to understand the deep hatreds and divisions among the various ethnic groups of what was once Yugoslavia. To begin with, Muslims, Croats, Serbs, and Slovenes are all Slavs - the large division of the human race that includes the Russians, Poles, Ukrainians, and Bulgarians.

Language is another area where the differences don't seem that great. The Serb language and the Croat language are nearly identical. In fact, linguists often speak of one language called Serbo-Croatian. The major difference is that the Serbs, like the Russians, write their language using the Cyrillic alphabet, and the Croats, like the Poles, write their language in the Roman alphabet. Slovene is very similar to Serbo-Croatian, and Muslims speak mainly Serbo-Croatian.

The main division among these peoples appears to be religion. The Slovenes

and Croats are mainly Roman Catholic. The Serbs are mainly Eastern Orthodox. And the Muslims, of course, are followers of Islam. The Muslims are a legacy of centuries of Turkish rule, in which followers of Islam were given preference in jobs and in status.

Over the last thousand years, each of these groups, while linked by basic similarities, developed its own tribal identity to the point that - today - each tends to look on the others as very different peoples. This attitude, aided by desire for land and wealth at the expense of other groups, has led to the current ethnic civil war in Bosnia.

DOING MORE

As in any news that takes place far from our shores, students might not relate very well to news from Bosnia. To make this story more relevant, you might ask some students to do a report on the history of Yugoslavia - how it became a nation, and how it died as a nation.

Another way to make this story more relevant is to compare Bosnia to the United States. We, too, are a multi-ethnic society. What conditions would have to exist for the U.S. to break apart in ethnic fighting? Is such a fate for the United States even possible? Discuss the possibilities.

Consider This...

The United States, like Bosnia, is a nation composed of different ethnic groups. But, unlike Bosnians, Americans have not resorted to war and "ethnic cleansing." Why have different racial and ethnic groups been able to live peacefully in the United States, but haven't been able to do so in Bosnia? As an American, what advice would you give a Bosnian about tolerance?

Source Citation (MLA 7th Edition)

"Hard times in Sarajevo: cold weather comes early to Bosnia's war-torn capital, bringing more hardship, death." *Current Events, a Weekly Reader publication* 24 Oct. 1994: 1+. *General OneFile*. Web. 5 Aug. 2013.

Document URL

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Gale Document Number: GALE|A16821754