

No evidence of genocide or ethnic cleansing in Kosovo

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ROLLIE KEITH CANADIAN POLITICIAN OF INTEGRITY Ottawa, June 20, 2005 By Boba Borojevic, CKCU 93.1 FM

Rollie Keith, the retired Canadian military officer who served as a OSCE Kosovo Verification Mission observer in Kosovo in the 1990s said he never saw any evidence of genocide or ethnic cleansing involving Slobodan Milosevic and Serbian forces in Kosovo and Metohija.

The 69-year-old Keith, who is a historian, met former Serbian president Slobodan Milosevic while he served as a OSCE observer in Kosovo in the 1990s. And he testified as a defense witness at Milosevic's trial at The Hague late 2004.

Why did you agreed to testify at the trial?

It was very clear to me that what took place in Yugoslavia in 1999 with the NATO invention along with Canada was not justified by the events on the ground that I was witnessing. As I wrote at that time, I said this was a frailer of diplomacy and it was wrong to make war on a nation that was struggling to deal with the insurrection and the problems that were inherited as ethnic diversity. As consequence of that I wrote and spoke out six years ago against the NATO war. When I was asked to participate in the defense of Mr. Milosevic I agreed to that. I have never stated privately nor publicly on the guilt nor innocence on the charges brought about against former president Milosevic. But, I did agree to testify on behalf of truth and justices, because I did not see that the precepts of the trial based on the charges of genocide and ethnic cleansing in order constituent parts of Yugoslavia and Kosovo were correct.

How do you explain discrepancy between your reporting from the ground in Kosovo and the mainstream media and some NGOs?

That is a very good question. That is the background to why I spoke out and wrote and continue to believe that we acted incorrectly; that is the West and Canada and NATO in particular. The mainstream media and many of the human rights NGOs picked up on the theme of what I thing is a simplicity of black and white; good and evil. In that the Serbian state, than led by the former president Slobodan Milosevic, was all bad and others were apparently the victims of that. What I witnessed and what was very clear to me in my few months in Kosovo in the spring of 1999, that there was an armed insurrection-taking place. It had peaked, I guess, in summer of 1998 and then under international pressure subsided, which led of coarse to the insurrection of the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) Kosovo verification mission, of which I volunteered and played a part in.

What we witnessed and what I witnessed specially in the area around Kosovo polje, was the agreement that had been agreed to in 1998, and that Mr. Milosevic had agreed to as well, to pool back the Serbian and Yugoslavian military and the Serbian MUT, the Serbian paramilitary police and the Kosovo Liberation Army or UCK of course were supposed to stay where they were. And this was not happening. They (UCK) were carrying out series of ambushes, kidnappings, killings. But, there were others who were retaliating as well. So, both sides were initiating incidents. In my area, it was my appreciation, and based what I was witnessing and what I was hearing that the majority of troubles were initiated by UCK. It appeared to me and it proved to be true that they were purposely trying to initiate a state crackdown that would justify in their opinion and international intervention by the NATO forces or the others. The discrepancy (in reporting between the mainstream media), is because they in my opinion, picked up on story that they did not realize there were two sides and it was much complicated than they wrote at the time, from the reality that was taken place on the ground which is what I just described, as I witnessed in.

Take for instance the Racak incident. I was not on the ground at Racak right at that time, but I was close by few weeks after. I heard the accounts of the people who were there. And of course we know the Finnish forensic study left a lot of questions unanswered, in that this did not appear to be a crime other than the insurrection that left number of fighters dead and perhaps a few others. But it certainly was not an incident, and history can justify, leading to an armed aggression against a sovereign state.

Is it correct that there was no ethnic cleansing on a mass scale, some "100.000 fleeing or being ethnically cleansed" as reported by the mainstream media, prior to the NATO attack?

That is absolutely correct. In fact the UNHCR, that was on the ground, did not report one external refugee leaving Kosovo prior to the NATO attack. Now, what was happening internally, as I have acknowledged and witnessed, as the fighting intensified, there were internal refugees that were moving around to stay out of the battle, which would happen in any type of internal conflict. But I did not see and I did not hear of any planned state sponsored program of ethnic cleansing that took place in the area of Kosovo Polje and surrounding area west of Pristina that I could at all justify as ethnic cleansing. No.

How would you classify the UCK at that time?

I classified the UCK that I encountered as two forces. In the primary Albanian ethnic villages, in the rural areas, there were, what I would refer to as home guards. These were young men armed with the variety of weapons, some modern some rather antiques, shot guns ect., for the local security as they saw it. And there were the formed UCK forces. These were not the major UCK forces that were in my area. But they were a bunch of young men, led by what appeared to be a fairly well organized cadre. Who in turn when I questioned what they had been doing and what they aim were, they always said they would have to refer to higher authority. So, it was a low level of conflict area in Kosovo at that time, but we had our share of fighting and ambushes some of which I was a participant in. It appeared to me that the UCK were not cooperative to us, as cooperative as the police and the Serbian and Yugoslav authorities, but were trying to provoke a response from the government authorities to justify international intervention to serve their interests. I think that history has shown that this judgment was correct.

How do you feel for having to resign from this provincial election just for telling the truth

about what you have seen in Kosovo?

I am quite upset about it. My opponent went back because I had made some comments to the press in an article that was written in November 2004, when I commented on the Mr. Milosevic himself. After talking to him for number of hours on two occasions, I referred to him as I thought he was sincere in fighting to keep his country together. I found him personable and very interesting to talk to. I never commented on his guilt or innocence, I just commented on his human qualities, and my judgment of a brief association with him in this regard. So, when this was brought up the suggestion was that I was an apologist for a war criminal. Of course, we know that Mr. Milosevic is under trial. But he has not been found guilty of any crime yet to my knowledge. I have some personal judgment, of course, that this trial has a lot of political undertones to it. I thought that my comments on a human being and my testifying on behalf of truth and justice certainly were relevant to the provincial champagne here in British Columbia but also, of course, for me as a candidate and a potential MLE to speak out for truth and justice is integrity. And that is a kind of character that I would hope that all politicians would inspired to and not be criticized and have my judgment and character questioned. I realized that it was becoming a side issue and that it was destructing the leader and my party from important issues of health and education and social programs. To stop the media frenzy I agreed to step down. But I do not think that I should have. I should be allowed to stay and fight. Coming back to my notion of truth and integrity and political integrity, which I think, is in short supply in Canada.

Will you stay in politics?

In my federal riding I have a lot of support. They have asked me to ride federally. I said I would if they want me and if my party endorses me. When this incident blew at the end of April, my support came out, my champagne team and community and my constituency here was universally in support of me. Politics is a calling. I think I am political person. The same reason that I wanted to work in the former Yugoslavia is the same reason why I inspired to run for the political office in Canada. I think we need more diplomacy and politics working on conflict resolution and knowledge of what goes on in the World. I think that Canada should play a prominent role in international politics to build a more peaceful, more diplomatically cohesive world. I am a Europhile. Canada became originally from European peoples, as did my peoples. I lived in Europe when I was serving with NATO in West Germany, I traveled extensively. I also served in the Middle East several years in different times with the UN. I think that Canada can play a constructive role to build on the European strength.

What kind of policy should Canada have towards the Balkans and Kosovo?

I think we should have an enthusiastic one of initiative and insight. We have to work with the Serbian people and the state of Serbia and Montenegro and also with the people of Albanian ethnic extraction to ensure that we build a cohesive society. I think that is what the people of the former Yugoslavia should work together to integrate in a strong Europe. I believe that the peoples of the former Yugoslavia now desire. I think Canada can play a constructive role in these types of negotiations by building a strong diplomatic presence and working with the UN and the OSCE and other agencies to ensure that we move forward do not slip backwards into ethnic conflict. It will take a lot of effort by the peoples who live in those areas. I think that Canada has a legacy of constructive international good will and we should exert that. **

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