

UN-NATO DISAGREEMENT OVER THE USE OF AIR POWER

[PART 2]

On 19 September General Rose, after Sarajevo was rocked by its worst fighting for seven months blamed the Muslim led Government forces for provoking shelling by the Bosnian Serbs, saying that he had told the Government, 'If you don't stop it immediately we'll be using air power against you. We've already been in consultation with NATO on targets'. Both sides used banned heavy weapons and Rose said it was a deliberate ploy by the Muslims to goad the Serbs. He said the Bosnian Government wanted 'to create images of war for the world and to get us to respond with air power'. Rose's comments did not go down well in the United States where he was fast becoming a hate figure for Bosniac supporters. But his words dramatised the Muslim dilemma. If they did not attack and stretch the status quo the Serbs merely consolidated the confrontation line and went on refusing to accept the Contact Group plan. Rose was being backed into a corner by both sides, he was understandably proprietorial about Sarajevo having every reason to be proud of the initial transformation in the city with shelling virtually non-existent. But he was also frustrated as I was by the absence of negotiations and he left few people under any illusions about his doubt that the Contact Group should be far more active and that their map should reflect strategic concerns of the parties and should be more sensitively tuned to this negotiating realities.

It had now been over six months since the three parties had been around the negotiating table together with Stoltenberg and myself on 12 February in Geneva. To the UN military peacekeeping had to go hand in hand with peacemaking and they were beginning to sense a vacuum. On 22 September in Srebrenica's exclusion zone a close air support mission attack on a Bosnian Serb T54/55 tank was ordered following a Serb attack on a French battalion UN vehicle which had injured one soldier. Three planes were used but the Force Commander had overruled the NATO suggestion of an alternative target of a single building in the ammunition depot located south of Pale, believing that a tank in the Srebrenica area was the proportional target. This judgement proved to be correct and there was no hostage taking and the Serbs got the message that attacks on UN forces would not be tolerated.

The pressure for wider targeting was building up from NATO and in early October Akashi told us that the collective and unanimous feeling amongst his military and civilian advisers was that they had no option other than to continue to utilise the air support of NATO judiciously and proportionately in support of UNPROFOR but resist using it in pursuit of political goals. I disagreed with this distinction, feeling that it was too theoretical. I wanted the map to be given more prominence at the negotiating table but not rule out imposing it if the Russians and Milosevic were on side. They felt that pressure to accept the Contact Group's proposed map should continue to be of a political and economic nature and that the use of NATO air power for anything other than support of UNPROFOR, would only result in retaliatory actions and continued escalation. There were other NATO demands and that was to have multiple targets identified and not to provide tactical warning to the Serbs. The Bosnian Serb side had claimed that the air action on 22 September had, as a result of a failure in communications on their side, resulted in non-combatants, including a child, being killed. The truth of this claim could not be verified but the UN wanted to continue to warn, wherever possible, and they also wanted proportionality defined in terms of damage to UNPROFOR, not to be widened to reflect a qualitative interpretation of the unacceptability and gravity of the attack, which would cause problems of interpretation between the UN and NATO. US Commanders in NATO were trying to widen their involvement and on this issue were getting some support from France, the Netherlands and Britain. I was seeing both the NATO cables and UN cables and Stoltenberg was directly advising Boutros-Ghali. This was no abstract issue for ICFY but one of the many tortured arguments which permeated the UN/NATO relationship. The outcome would determine whether UNPROFOR could remain on the ground for its humanitarian role and continue to support, in a myriad of ways, the peacemaking process as well.

The UN was also facing more incidents on Mount Igman. The Mount Igman demilitarised zone which Stoltenberg had insisted should be instituted in August 1993, against UN military advice, had

proved to be an important aspect of stabilising the situation around Sarajevo. It had prevented Serb capture of the only route to Sarajevo through territory held exclusively by the Government. It had also stopped both sides from resuming conflict over areas which they felt of tactical importance. The American view in August 1993 of its strategic importance had been more perceptive than that of the UN. It was helpful in August 1995 to be able to deploy the French and British artillery reinforcements to Mount Igman and to use it in addition to aircraft against Serb heavy weapons still in the exclusion zone. Occupation of the zone by UNPROFOR had been seen by the Serbs as a critical indicator of the UN's ability as a peacekeeping force to provide sufficient security for them to accept the tactical risks of withdrawal that inevitably accompanied local or general agreements.

A number of incidents had been occurring on Mount Igman since 1 October when the Bosnian Government forces had infiltrated through the zone to attack a Serb position 1 km northeast of Rakitnica, outside the 20 km Sarajevo exclusion zone. The Serbs retaliated with artillery and 20 mm mortar fire. Government forces also attempted to attack Rakitnica itself supported by mortar fire. UNPROFOR troops interpositioned and the situation was resolved through negotiations at the Presidency with President Izetbegovic assuring General Rose that his forces would respect the demilitarised zone.

On 2 October UNPROFOR intercepted 30 Government soldiers attempting to infiltrate to the east and then another 150 government soldiers were intercepted at Bjelasnica. On 6 October government forces attacked a BSA command post about 500 metres outside the demilitarised zone but just inside the 20 km Sarajevo exclusion zone. On arrival, UNPROFOR personnel found 20 dead Serbs. Eventually the situation was brought under control but it was yet another reminder how difficult UNPROFOR's task was becoming this third winter as many of us had predicted.

In Moscow on 12 October over lunch Kozyrev spoke in strong terms about the NATO decision on exclusion zones to Stoltenberg and me and complained that Russia still had not had formal replies to various questions put formally both to NATO and the UN Secretary General. Before any definite decision was taken by the Secretary General Russia had to be consulted - this was not simply an issue between the UNSG and NATO. Churkin said that various points in the new NATO position "leapt out" as going beyond the existing guidelines. For example, the lack of advance warning significantly increased the risk of collateral damage; UNPROFOR's ability to influence an operation once it was under way was reduced to nothing and there was a real risk that NATO action of the sort proposed could prompt dangerous escalation. The Russians were concerned that the interests of both NATO and the Bosnian Serbs in presenting themselves as "tough guys" could coincide, leading to a dangerous confrontation and Kozyrev told me that if the Russians concluded that a decision had been taken behind their backs which was likely to have negative consequences, Russia reserved the right to pull its troops out. He had to be able to convince the Duma that if a Russian was killed serving with the UN that Russia had been fully consulted and involved within the UN. Some of these were fair points that NATO had to be more sensitive to.

At the end of October the Bosnian Bihac Corps attacked out of the Bihac pocket towards the south into Bosnian Serb held territory capturing several hundred square kilometres. Some 7,000-8,000 civilian Bosnian Serbs fled, mainly into Croatian Serb held territory in Croatia after Bihac Corps had seized the Grabez plateau east of Bihac and territory to the south as far as Ripac and threatened the town of Bosanska Krupa. This was accompanied by a lot of press predictions that the tide of battle was turning in favour of the Muslims. Certainly the stalemate which had been the dominant mood since February was over. But the UN military assessment was that the Bosnian Serbs would hit back once they regrouped their forces, and collected together sufficient fuel and ammunition. This cautious assessment received scant attention given the natural relief felt worldwide that the Muslims were not destined to always be on the receiving end of Serb victories.

By the middle of November the Bosnian Serbs were fighting back and recaptured some of the territory they had lost a few weeks before. Also 600 former Abdic soldiers were concentrated on the Croatian-Bosnian border area 20 km north west of Bihac and recruiting 3,000 or more from their refugee camps at Turanj and Batnoga where there were more than 35,000 people who all wanted to return to Velika Kladusa and had been living in appalling conditions. The US had by 14 November scaled back their earlier call for a 20km exclusion zone around Bihac to 10km and were trying to

deescalate the situation, including warning the Bosnian government to show restraint as the Bosnian Serbs began to pound the town and take the high ground above Bihac. Also, two missiles had been launched from a Serb plane which had taken off from Udbina in Sector South and hit a factory which had been used by the Bosnian government forces as an ammunition dump. The Croatian Serb forces were firing their heavy artillery into the pocket. The eleven UNMOs in the pocket and the Bangladeshi battalions' movements were heavily restricted so no one knew exactly what was happening.

The German Presidency on 16 November gave at short notice a statement to the European Parliament based on their statement to the UN General Assembly. It regretted the US decision recently announced to withdraw from enforcement of the arms embargo and to modify its participation in the combined WEU/NATO operation Sharp Guard in the Adriatic. It was also said that the offensive against Bihac had to stop immediately. In NATO it was recognized that any exclusion zone would have much of it in built up areas making the use of airpower very difficult. Also Bihac was the garrison town and military headquarters of the Bosnian Muslim forces that had attacked out of the pocket a little time before. Karadzic had received a similar letter the day before from Akashi to the Security Council Presidency statement of 13 November and he sent him a very tough reply drawing attention to the fact that the fighting was started by the Muslims and that the international community did not condemn them, and saying, 'a "safe area" is a curious concept, providing the Muslims with security inside it and legitimacy to use as a springboard for attacks as they please'.

By 17 November the situation in and around Bihac was deteriorating fast. In New York concern for the Bangladeshi contingent was mounting. They were on emergency rations and would be running out of supplies by 25 November. They only had small reserves of fuel and one personal weapon for every five soldiers and had no winter clothing as supplies were stuck in Zagreb. Madeleine Albright wanted not only a resolution calling on UNPROFOR to use air power to protect itself but language to ensure UNSCR 820 was enforced preventing fuel reaching the Krajina Serbs. Since the Croatians were already supplying limited quantities of oil to the Serbs and this form of words would scupper our economic negotiations she conceded that it would be unwise to go ahead. But it was one more sign of a Security Council out of touch. By now Abdic's Muslim forces were attacking Izetbegovic's forces in Velika Kladusa and he was thought to have 5,000 troops. The Serbs launched another air raid in which napalm and cluster bombs were used on the Bosnian V Corps in the south west part of Bihac town, fortunately the napalm had not ignited. Since the existing UNSCRs did not give authority to attack Udbina airfield in Croatia a new resolution was drafted to extend the authority in existing UNSCR 836 into Croatia.

Meanwhile in Sarajevo the previously independent newspaper Oslobodjenje had become increasingly part of government propaganda and wrote 'France and Britain are now openly on the side of Radovan Karadzic and are exploiting the fact that UN authority for airstrikes is needed. The problem is not a military one, but exclusively a political one involving the French and British Foreign Ministries. For them there is no aggressor or victim in Bosnia, everyone is the same. Their strategic support is for Belgrade, not Sarajevo'. The atmosphere too was becoming sulphurous amongst NATO partners following the US decision to opt out of policing the embargo. The French government at the highest level was making it plain that they had information that the US were supplying light weapons and light missiles to the Muslims. Even so, on 19 November, there was enough unanimity for two UNSCRs 958 and 959 to be passed on the use of air power and on safe areas respectively. This was followed by NATO aircraft cratering the Udbina runway on 21 November. This was the most minimal response the UN could have taken, even so Karadzic called it 'the act of a criminal regional organization which violated all norms of international law', and talked of the possibility of reprisals. Personally I would have authorized the targeting of the aircraft but it was a difficult judgement and I was more than content to trust General de Lapresle.

On 23 November two or three shells hit the hospital in Bihac, clearly within the safe area perhaps aimed at a Bosnian government tank near the hospital. Velika Kladusa was being recaptured by Abdic's troops and the Bosnian V Corps were being pressed hard on three sides. The aid agencies believed there were some 70,000 people in Bihac swollen by the influx of refugees. The key US figures in Washington and New York were becoming very anxious, believing the Serbs would take

the town of Bihac whereas the UN and UK view was that the Serbs would not want to undertake such a demanding and expensive military task.

The North Atlantic Council meeting on 24 November revealed the strains building up in the Alliance. The two NATO air attacks on a Serb missile site near Otaka had raised the temperature considerably. The target was an SA-2 missile site but during the attack NATO aircraft had been locked on to by Serb radar and this raised fundamental questions about the danger to the aircraft unless the associated Serb radar sites were destroyed. The UN were not ready to request such strikes and NATO was not ready to fly its planes unless the radars were suppressed. Fortunately on 25 November a cease-fire was negotiated by General Rose in Sarajevo with the Serbs and the Muslims.

Episode after episode was showing up the folly of the Security Council 'safe area' policy. For the US there had been an additional and painful lesson which their military did not need convincing about but which their politicians were still trying to evade, air power alone could not save a safe area particularly if UN forces were deployed in these areas. Also, UN ground to air controllers were needed for greater accuracy. So true to form the US Administration looked for a scapegoat and found it in General Rose. Madeleine Albright was reported as being very angry about an alleged statement by Rose to the effect that the Bosnian government should throw away the Contact Group map and accept a new negotiating framework. The truth was that the US were making impossible demands on UNPROFOR and some military commanders, as if to deflect criticism of their withdrawal from the WEU/NATO force in the Adriatic, were trying to 'up the ante' on the UN Commanders. The French intervened to stop NATO flying two reconnaissance aircraft and 37 combat aircraft together over Bosnian airspace because they feared that it would look like a raid on Serb radar and was as much designed to tempt the Serbs to switch on Serb radar so that NATO could strike at them in self defence as to serve any UNPROFOR purpose. Notwithstanding French fears with the daily activation of many more SAM2s and 6s by the Serbs, NATO did need many more planes for jamming and air defence suppression. The problem was that they were not seen as being reconnaissance but as hostile by the Serbs.

Though the UN had just escaped being dragged in as combatant that was only because of the hard headed realism of Generals de Lapresle and Rose. The UN was being damaged by the impossibility of fulfilling their mandate. Also we were now seeing governments justifying not using force by exaggerating the UN military contribution to the aid effort. It was a vicious circle in which the UN was being damaged.

General Rose paid a high price for Bihac in terms of his acceptability to the Bosnian government and to the US. He was charged by the Bosnian Prime Minister with having the blood of thousands of Muslims in Bihac on his hands in an emotive statement to the television cameras in Rose's presence in the Presidency building in Sarajevo, which was played on prime time right across America. Only later when the true facts came out and the much smaller number of people who lost their life in Bihac was known was Silajdzic challenged to withdraw his allegations. The Panorama interview in which Silajdzic refused to do so is one of the most riveting television broadcasts and demonstrates that instant television has its drawbacks for those who exploit it as well as its advantages. Rose's dignity or humiliation, however one saw it, under public attack at the time was shown in a very different light as Silajdzic shifted, twisted and turned as he tried to avoid apologizing for his original totally unsubstantiated allegations. I only wished that the same treatment could have been meted out to other Serb, Croat or Muslim leaders whose exaggerated claims have all too easily been accepted as the instant wisdom of the hour.

Through the winter months the cessation of hostilities agreement (COHA) held after a fashion but by the Spring of 1995 the absence of real negotiations, intensified military activity, an increasing dissatisfaction from both the Bosnian government and the Bosnian Serbs with UNPROFOR's role resulted in a crisis. That crisis preceded the air strikes of the 24 and 25 May though it is easy to believe that the crisis was precipitated by the air strikes. UNPROFOR had been well aware for some time that they needed a more graduated and proportional response capability between returning fire with small arms or action from the air. Ever since November 1992 the Co-Chairmen of ICFY and the UN Secretary-General Special Representative to Yugoslavia as well as the UN

Force Commanders had been agitating for more troops to cope with an expanding mandate. In June 1995 the opportunity for creating a Theatre Reserve Force had great appeal to UNPROFOR since it would increase their capacity to respond flexibly and proportionately. The troops on offer were:

- one multi-national brigade of about 4,500 men of whom 2,500 were being deployed into theatre.
- 24 Air Mobile Brigade (UK)
- a multi-national French brigade on stand by in France

There was considerable discussion about how this Theatre Reserve Force could be used and the UN in New York and in Zagreb believed that if the intention was to use force for purposes beyond self defence and the current mandate then the Security Council Resolution being prepared should provide clear and unambiguous authority for such a use of force. The UN's preference, however, was to confine the Reserve to the current mandate and rules of engagement following the line taken by the Secretary-General in his report on UNSCR Resolution 982 (1995) in paragraph 76.

In the press there was much speculation about a rapid reaction force and one of the most welcomed early features was the French and British decision to provide an artillery capacity which hitherto the UN had lacked. It was this capacity deployed around Sarajevo which provided an extremely useful addition to NATO air strikes in being able to target precisely Bosnian Serb heavy weapons firing within the Sarajevo exclusion zone and being able to respond immediately and being less susceptible to adverse weather conditions. Despite UNPROFOR having to suffer the humiliation of losing the safe areas of Srebrenica and Zepa morale during the Summer improved because of the reinforcements. The decision taken to defend Gorazde from any Bosnian Serb attack by NATO air strikes was complemented by the decision taken in secrecy to remove all but the UN forward air controllers from Gorazde. This re deployment was done quietly so that by the time a decision was taken to launch air strikes at the end of August, there were no identifiable UN forces on the ground in Gorazde. Also there was a greatly strengthened UN presence in Sarajevo and no need for the UN in Bihac since this was now under the control of Muslim and Croat forces. For the first time since the UN was deployed in Bosnia Herzegovina in the Summer of 1992 it was possible for UN commanders to contemplate air strikes with reasonable confidence that they would be able to protect the lives of the servicemen under their command.