

## Canadians need to know the government hasn't dropped the ball on Kosovo

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Canada fought a war with its NATO allies in 1999 to pave the way for Kosovo's independence, but now the issue is reaching near crisis proportions. You really have to be determined to learn the Canadian government's foreign policy stance on Kosovo.

Last week, Kosovo's independence was front and centre when the Group of Eight leading industrial countries met in Germany, with Russian president Vladimir Putin promising to veto a United Nations resolution enabling Kosovo to break away from Serbia.

The UN has a plan to give Kosovo conditional independence with the European Union supervising it and protecting its Serbian minority while Kosovo builds its own security and defence forces and pursues membership in international organizations.

Since 1999, after NATO coalition partners bombed Serbian military and paramilitary forces in Serbia and Kosovo for 78 straight days, the breakaway Serbian province has been run by the UN and NATO.

Canada played a major role in that air war, committing 18 CF-18s and some 300 personnel including 69 pilots who were rotated through Operation Echo, Canada's contribution to the Operation Allied Force bombing campaign.

The Canadian jets represented just two per cent of the nearly 1,000 allied air craft, but they led a remarkable 10 per cent of the bombing missions.

Altogether, the pilots flew 684 combat sorties and dropped nearly 500,000 pounds of bombs.

The purpose of Canadians' participation was to halt ethnic cleansing of Albanians in Kosovo and to achieve NATO's short-term goal of establishing a NATO protectorate there.

As then-defence minister Art Eggleton said at the time: "We seek the immediate end to violence in Kosovo; the complete withdrawal of the military forces; the unconditional and safe return of all refugees, a million of them; the stationing in Kosovo of a military presence; and the establishment of a political framework under which the Kosovars can be appropriately governed."

Later, Canada sent some 1,300 Canadian Forces peacekeepers to Operation Quadrant to assist the UN-Security-Council authorized interim civilian administration and to provide safety and security to more than Albanian 750,000 refugees who flooded back into Kosovo.

Operation Quadrant ended in September, 2002, when the last Canadians returned home.

The war took 11 weeks but, seven years on, achieving that last objective: establishing a political framework under which the Kosovars can be appropriately governed remains problematic, to say the very least.

It has been an admittedly tortured process. When Albanians returned to Kosovo after the war, they began to exact revenge on the Serb minority. Some 200,000 Serbs, Gypsies and Serb-speaking Muslims fled Kosovo when 50,000 NATO troops seized the province.

Kosovo Albanians voted for municipal governments for the first time in October 2000, but the dwindling population of 80,000 Serbs stayed at home, fearing violence and harassment. Kosovo's population is about 1.9 million.

Some of the worst ethnic violence since 1998 and 1999 erupted in March 2004. The UN bolstered 9,000 international and local police and 17,000 remaining peacekeepers by 2,000 in an attempt to contain it.

Kosovo's first UN-governed election resulted in Ramush Haradinaj, former leader of the Albanian Kosovo Liberation Army, becoming prime minister in October 2004.

When Haradinaj stepped down to face war crimes charges in March 2005, Britain, Germany and Italy rushed 1,200 more troops to the province to quell further violence.

Driving the turmoil was unemployment and Kosovars' longing for independence from Serbia.

Serbia, on the other hand, views Kosovo Polje – the Field of Black Birds where a historic battle between Serbian knights and Turks was fought in 1389 – as the centre of its Orthodox Christian faith.

Russian President Putin opposes an independent Kosovo, fearing it would set a precedent for the provinces of Abkhazia, South Ossetia and Transdniestria which broke away from Georgia and which also want independence.

U.S. President George W. Bush marched into the fray at the G8 Summit saying: "...at some point, sooner or later, you've got to say enough is enough, Kosovo is independent."

Prime Minister Stephen Harper, meanwhile, was clear at the G8 on his positions on African aid and Chinese human rights, but he made no mention of Kosovo.

In fact, it took two days this week to pry just two sentences out of the Department of Foreign Affairs on Canada's position on Kosovo. They are:

"Canada has expressed its support for the recommendations by UN Special Envoy (Martti) Ahtisaari on an internationally supervised independence for Kosovo.

"Canada believes that there is now an opportunity to resolve this long-standing issue and calls on all involved to show flexibility and act responsibly to promote regional peace and security."

If only for the sake of Canadian air force men and women who risked their lives and toiled in Operation Echo and the peacekeepers who kept Serbs and Albanians from each other throats for nearly three years, it would be appropriate for the Harper government to show greater public leadership on Kosovo.

Canadians need to know that Canada has a considerable investment in Kosovo and that this government hasn't dropped the ball in pursuit of a political framework under which the Kosovars can be appropriately governed.

That was Canada's political goal during the air war in the first place.

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