

Rebuilding the University of Pristina

by Robert Sedgwick
Editor, WENR

Serbia's capitulation after 72 days of NATO air strikes has paved the way for the fall reopening of the University of Pristina as an Albanian language institution. Many challenges line the road ahead: campus buildings have to be renovated, equipment needs to be updated and university records and documents have to be reconstructed.

Then there is the enormous task of reintegrating returning students into Kosovo's system of higher education. By late July 1999, more than 700,000 ethnic Albanians had been repatriated from neighboring countries, according to the United Nations High Commission for Refugees; there are still more than 100,000 Albanian Kosovars waiting to come home. An estimated 10,000 to 12,000 students are among the refugees.

In recent years, the University of Pristina has come to reflect the ethnic strife that has long divided Serbs and ethnic Albanians. About 90 percent of Kosovo's 2 million inhabitants are ethnic Albanians, most of them Muslim.

University Splits in Two

After Kosovo was stripped of its autonomy in 1989, ethnic Albanians set up a shadow government and Albanian language schools. As a result, the University of Pristina split into two institutions: a Serb state-run school and a parallel university for ethnic Albanians.

The latter was strictly an underground operation with classes and research conducted in private homes, cellars and other makeshift facilities. Professors and their assistants continued to teach without pay or health benefits, while books and mimeographed lectures

Timeline

1945: Marshal Tito emerges as head of the new socialist state of Yugoslavia, which is comprised of six republics: Bosnia, Croatia, Macedonia, Montenegro, Serbia and Slovenia.

1970: The University of Pristina is founded in Kosovo as a bilingual institution for majority Albanians and minority Serbs.

1974: After years of repressing Albanian nationalism, Tito finally grants Kosovo autonomy within the Republic of Serbia. Under a new constitution, ethnic Albanians are free to establish their own parliament, as well as legal and education systems, with relatively little interference from Belgrade.

1989: Yugoslavia begins to unravel following the collapse of the communist regime. Croatia and Slovenia gain independence three years later, setting the stage for the civil war in Bosnia-Herzegovina.

Serbian President Slobodan Milosovic revokes Kosovo's autonomy as ethnic tensions escalate. Albanian institutions fall under the direct control of the government in Belgrade.

1990: The Serbian government repeals the entire body of education legislation passed by the Kosovo parliament. Primary and secondary schools are forced to accept a Serbian-language curriculum while the special Albanian curriculum is scrapped.

Similar measures imposed on the University of Pristina meet with fierce resistance from Albanian faculty members, administrators and students.

1991: Albanian is officially banned as the university's main language of instruction, and henceforth, only Serb professors are authorized to teach courses.

As a result, hundreds of ethnic Albanian faculty members and administrative aides are expelled; 20,000 stu-

dents are also banned from the campus.

In all, more than 18,000 teachers, professors and staff members are dismissed from schools and university faculties in Kosovo by the end of the year.

1992: Ethnic Albanians boycott virtually all Serbian-controlled institutions and set up para-state structures of their own, including an underground parliament, health-care facilities and an education system. These shadow institutions are largely funded by the Albanian Diaspora community.

1996: In an attempt to resolve the ongoing education dispute, ethnic Albanian leader Ibrahim Rugova and now Yugoslavian President Milosovic, meet in Rome to sign an agreement allowing Albanian students and teachers to share university facilities with their Serbian counterparts.

However, implementation of the accord is stalled. The Serbs are only willing to hand over a few buildings to the Albanian academic community and these are badly vandalized and stripped of vital equipment.

1997: On Oct. 1, some 20,000 students demonstrate for the right to return to university and school buildings but are dispersed by police. Other demonstrations follow.

1998: Increasing violence derails the Rome agreement on education. The Kosovo Liberation Army emerges and begins attacks on Serbian police.

The Yugoslav army retaliates with brutal force, and subsequent massacres of Albanian citizens cause an international outcry.

1999: All classes and research activities at the University of Pristina are suspended following the commencement of NATO bombing raids on March 24.

were printed in secret.

In 1998 the parallel education system as a whole enrolled a total of 266,413 primary-school pupils, 58,700 secondary-school students and 17,000 university students.

At the same time, the war forced large numbers of ethnic Albanian students to leave the country and continue their studies elsewhere.

Many students — as well as faculty and staff members — sought refuge at Tirana University in Albania. Others fled to Macedonia, while some remained home and joined the Kosovo Liberation Army.

The War and its Aftermath

University building interiors were badly vandalized even before the NATO bombing campaign began. When the authorities finally relinquished control of some buildings to ethnic Albanians under the Rome agreement on education (see timeline sidebar) professors and administrators returned to find that chairs, desks, books and computers had been looted. Up until the air strikes, university buildings used by the Serbian academic community were spared.

Other buildings fell into disrepair during the early 1990s when government funding was diverted towards the war effort in Bosnia.

The overall damage incurred to the university since the war is extensive. Buildings and facilities are in desperate need of repair, and much of the technical equipment on campus needs to be modernized to meet current international standards.

During the NATO bombardments, Serbian police broke into many buildings — smashing in doors and windows and covering walls with pro-Serb graffiti.

Twenty-two computers were stolen out of the language lab and 20,000 books, written in three languages, were missing from the library. Other pieces of technical equipment like fax and copy ma-

chines were also looted.

UN Takes Control

On June 30, in accordance with the international peace agreement, the university's Serbian rector handed the keys to the school's buildings to members of the United Nations Mission in Kosovo (UNMIK).

UNMIK's task has been to guard the buildings while trying to mediate an agreement between the two sides. Nevertheless, a number of Albanian faculty and staff members entered the campus on their own accord following the ceasefire and occupied many of the buildings.

Due to this incident, university buildings are currently locked and will not be reopened until both sides agree over future use of the

against the Serbian regime.

Many of the hard liners, who want all Serbs out of the university, have accused Kelmendi and his associates of being too moderate.

At least one Serb is killed each night in revenge killings while thousands of others have been turned out of their homes and forced to flee the province.

An estimated 70,000 Serbs, fearing reprisals from returning ethnic Albanians, have fled Kosovo since the war ended in June. Much of the Serbian academic community has likewise vacated the university following the ceasefire.

Their fears were not exaggerated. On June 24th, a Serbian economics professor and two staff members were murdered on campus.

UNMIK has proposed a three-phase plan to reopen the University of Pristina as a public institution for both Serbs and ethnic Albanians.

campus facilities.

UNMIK has proposed a three-phase plan to reopen the University of Pristina as a public institution for both Serbs and ethnic Albanians, with classes and research conducted in both languages.

Tensions Still Run High

But there are those who feel that UNMIK is wasting its time. Despite restoration of the status quo, the political situation in Kosovo remains volatile, with ethnic tensions still running high between the two communities.

Compounding matters, Albanian rector Zejnel Kelmendi and university board members are under pressure from those students and faculty members who fought

The language question will also be a difficult issue to resolve, especially because most Serb students who attended the University of Pristina came from outside Kosovo.

Before the NATO air strikes, there were 7,000 to 12,000 Serbs enrolled at the university, although figures regarding the Serbian academic community have not been reliable.

Because the University of Pristina was the only institution of higher education in the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia that did not require compulsory examinations for admission, it attracted a lot of applicants from Serbia and Montenegro. Most of them have left, and it is doubtful they will be returning anytime soon.