

October 11, 1995

Mr. Mohammed Sacirbey  
Minister of Foreign Affairs  
Foreign Office  
Sarajevo, BOSNIA-HERZEGOVINA

Dear Mr. Sacirbey,

When Croatian forces first recovered the Krajina region from the Serbs in August, it seemed to me the greatest priority of that time that the Croatians should not duplicate the crime that had been visited on them and on your people of Bosnia, driving out the Serbian population in another "ethnic cleansing." If, instead, the Croatians, government and people, were to make it genuinely safe for the Serbian population of that region to live in peace with their neighbors, in the places where their families, like the Croatians themselves, were so rooted for centuries, giving them not only rhetorical but practical assurances, then the entire situation would be transformed and the way opened to drain the poison out of the conflict of recent years.

Since the Croatian population is so predominantly Roman Catholic, I thought the best opportunity to promote such an idea was to request the Holy See to mobilize support for it from the Croatian Catholic hierarchy and clergy, appealing to their deepest faith tradition to act with generosity toward these defeated Serbs. I am Catholic myself, a Jesuit priest, professor of peace studies at Boston College and long active in efforts to promote the peace in such places as Northern Ireland and the Middle East. Therefore I sent the letter of which I enclose a copy here to Cardinal Sodano, the Secretary of State of the Holy See.

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Now that the tide has turned in areas of Bosnia as well, I want to make a like appeal to you, and through you to the terribly wronged people of your country. I have been enlisting the help of Muslim friends here in the United States, with whom I have worked closely for peace in other areas of the world. I know that it is repugnant to the deepest and most generous faith tradition of Muslims, as it should be of Christians, to behave with such brutality to others as the Serbians, whipped up to paranoid frenzy by a criminal leadership, have acted toward your people. The destruction of this war should not now be compounded, but instead reversed.

I wish I came to you now with a stronger hand, fortified by a more positive response from the Catholics to whom I have appealed. What I hear from Catholic spokesmen, clerical and lay, in Croatia is mostly about the offenses of the Serbs, which are unquestionable. The Serbian population of the Krajina has mostly fled, whether from their own fear and rejection of Croatian rule or driven out by actions of the Croats. It becomes clearer day by day that for the few, mostly elderly, Serbs who remained, the looting and destruction of their homes and property and widespread brutal murder is common, as ugly a picture as what the Serbs had done themselves.

Nonetheless, I believe that it is within the power of your Bosnian government, now that areas of your country come back under your control, to institute an altogether different policy. I think it is to your advantage to do so, besides restoring the civilized decency and inter-ethnic peace that has characterized the society of your country in the past. And I believe your doing so could influence the Croats.

I am glad to see my own government, in the United States, at last actively engaged in promoting peace among the nations of what was Yugoslavia. If the effort is only to confirm and take advantage of a successful completion of the genocidal "ethnic cleansing" campaigns

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of recent years, then I do not believe it will provide the basis of justice on which a lasting peace can be built. It is not within the power of U.S. and other international mediators to get beyond that. It could only be from yourselves that the initiative could come to welcome back the displaced Serbian populations of such areas as have returned to your control, and make it possible for them to live in peace. This could then also be a fundamental demand in your negotiations with the Serbian government figures who will be speaking for the rebel Serbs of Bosnia, that it be made equally possible and safe for other Bosnians who have been ruthlessly expelled from areas siezed by the rebel Serbs to return to their homes and live in peace.

Such a reciprocal proposition, I expect, would have the support of the U.S. and other mediators. The welcome to the displaced Serbs of such parts of Bosnia as you control could be made unilaterally, and that would strengthen your hand, both with the Serbs and with the Croatians, in urging and demanding like conduct from them. Success in this would disinfect the situation in the entire region, transforming it beyond recognition. Even a partial success in implementing such a policy would carry vast promise for a better future.

I feel confident in placing such a proposition before yourself. All the time you were such a lonely voice, as Ambassador, before the American population, I understood the fundamental decency and humanity with which you pleaded for justice for your own people. I appeal now, trustingly, to the civilized tradition and strong but never fanatical Muslim faith that has characterized your people, with which, as an American Catholic peace activist, I feel strong affinity.

Sincerely,

Raymond G. Helmick, S.J.