



Commentary: *Paul James*

Reconstructing and Reconciling a War-torn World

Around the world today, numerous communities face an immediate future of intense violence and social upheaval.¹ Iraq, Afghanistan, Israel–Palestine, the Solomon Islands and the Congo are just some of the most obvious examples. In other places, after years of war, there are signs of reconciliation: Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Rwanda, East Timor, Northern Ireland and Sri Lanka.

In Bosnia in September 2003, for example, a memorial service was held for the 7000 Muslim men and boys who were massacred in Srebrenica in July 1995. At the service there were two remarkable signs of change. Security was provided in part by Bosnian Serb police, and the Bosnian Serb prime minister talked about ‘respect for the dead’ and called for reconciliation. Such a scenario would have been inconceivable in past years.² In Rwanda, across 2003, communities experimented with Gacaca tribunals — grass-roots courts conducted to attempt to alleviate the pressure on criminal

-
1. In late 2003 I travelled through Bosnia-Herzegovina, Kosovo and Serbia with Hariz Halilovich, and this commentary reflects my first-hand observations during that trip. This article is based upon an address given in Sarajevo to the conference ‘Development and Cohesion in South-East Europe: Strategies and Policies in a Fragmented Region’, November 2003. With thanks to Hariz Halilovich and Damian Grenfell. The translations in the article are by Hariz.
 2. *The Economist*, 27 September 2003.

courts in the aftermath of the 1994 genocide when 800,000 people were killed. In November last year, 673 such tribunals were begun. By comparison, the International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda (ICTR) is grinding on slowly and ineffectively, and although the ex-Information Minister Eliézer Niyiteyeka was sentenced to life-imprisonment in May, we have only seen a total of eleven judgements since the Tribunal began in January 1997.³ The signs of hope come from the elsewhere, with examples such as the 'Remembering Rwanda' Tenth Anniversary Memorial Project organized for 2004. The hope comes from dealing directly with the problems rather than trying to ignore the past or paint a liberal-capitalist coat of paint over the ruins inherited from times of crisis.

In East Timor in June 2003, a three-day healing workshop was held for the first time by the country's Truth Commission (CAVR)⁴ for the survivors of serious human rights abuses suffered during Indonesia's twenty-five year occupation. The workshop was run in CAVR's national office in Dili, the ex-prison Comarca Dalide, once used by the Indonesians to hold and interrogate political detainees. Since its inception in early 2002, the CAVR has taken nearly 5000 statements from victims and witnesses. It is an example of a relatively successful operation that has learned from the strengths and limitations of other commissions, such as in South Africa and Peru.

Does this mean that reconciliation and reconstruction is proceeding productively in such places as Bosnia and Herzegovina, Rwanda and East Timor? Any answer has to be tempered; any commentator circumspect. Some things are improving in these places. However, if the most optimistic prognoses are for those post-war countries such as Bosnia and Herzegovina, hopes for reconstructing those devastated by the global War on Terror — Iraq, Afghanistan — are, in the short to immediate term, deeply black. Despite the gains in some regions where their wars ceased years ago, the processes of reconciliation and reconstruction are hindered by numerous problems: attempts by governments to paint over the seriousness of the problems that remain; the lack of systematic connection between the various government bureaucracies, non-government agencies and international interventions; attempts at quick fixes; not to mention the disjointed, self-serving and

3. Eighth Annual Report, International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda, July 2002–June 2003.
4. Commission for Reception, Truth, and Reconciliation, known by its Portuguese acronym CAVR (Comissao de Acolhimento, Verdade e Reconciliacao de Timor-Leste).

limited support given by the rest of the world. How much worse will the experience of Afghanistan and Iraq be? In this brief commentary I cannot attempt to answer that question directly, and will only shed some light on it indirectly by recounting — in part a result of my recent visit to these areas — the slowness of reconstruction in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

NATO's Operation Deliberate Force was conducted in 1995. Seven years later, the International Crisis Group report of March 2002 summarized the legal situation in Bosnia as a mess:

The law does not yet rule in Bosnia & Herzegovina. What prevail instead are nationally defined politics, inconsistency in the application of law, corrupt and incompetent courts, a fragmented judicial space, half-baked or half-implemented reforms, and sheer negligence. Bosnia in short is a land where respect for and confidence in the law and its defenders is weak.

Bosnians are unequal before the law, and they know it. Exercise of legal rights to repossess property or to reclaim a job too often depends upon an individual's national identity — or that of the judge before whom she or he appears. Even when citizens do get justice in the courts, the chances of having decisions enforced can be slim, since the execution of court orders is often prolonged unlawfully or hedged in arbitrary conditions. Obtaining justice is also subject to geographical chance. War crimes in one entity or canton are still hailed as acts of heroism in another.⁵

Despite the work of many people, the situation has not improved much in the last two years. Moreover, in Bosnia as in Kosovo, East Timor and Rwanda, reconstruction and reconciliation continues to be threatened by poverty and weak economies at a time of rising expectations. Now, nearly a decade after the immediate conflict, life should be getting better in Bosnia, but the figures are not inspiring. Over forty per cent of Bosnians are unemployed (unofficial figures from many parts of the country suggest regional unemployment to be around seventy per cent); international aid is declining (\$US699 million in 2000; expected to be around \$200

5. International Crisis Group, *Courting Disaster: The Misrule of Law in Bosnia and Herzegovina*, Balkans Report No. 127, March 2002, cited from the 'Executive Summary', p. i. Reports can be downloaded from www.crisisweb.org.

million in 2007); and debt servicing is increasing (\$130 million in 2000, expected to be over \$800 million in 2010).

Opinion polls suggest that what people worry most about is jobs; and some worry that the economic malaise could again create ethnic tension. Reconstructing the economy is a vital part of the overall reconstruction of any war-torn country, but unfortunately the international support in this area is weak. This support, or lack of it, needs to be put into perspective. Kosovo's entire aid reconstruction budget for 2000 was the equivalent of the cost of half-a-day's bombing during the Kosovo intervention. The total USAID budget for Bosnia and Herzegovina for 2003 was \$30.1 million, of which thirty-four per cent went to economic restructuring. By comparison, NATO's eleven-week bombing of the former Yugoslavia, which killed between 500 and 1800 civilians, also inflicted an estimated \$4 billion damage on public infrastructure such as bridges, factories and electrical plants.⁶

Put these figures alongside the budget sought by George W. Bush to continue the War on Terror: \$87 billion. The War on Terror simply has to have huge consequences for those other sites of war reconstruction — namely, it has set up a hierarchy of aid priorities. This means that some places are no longer seen as strategically important enough to support any more than minimally, while money continues to pour into Iraq.

Reconstruction and reconciliation clearly needs to be a long-term and comprehensive process: cultural, political, legal and economic. The evidence suggests that after the upheaval of war, reconstruction cannot successfully happen in a country operating without support, but neither should external support take the form that economic 'humanitarian intervention' now tends to take. In fact, the new kinds of intervention are part of the problem. Here I am not just talking about the continuing military presence of foreign troops (paradoxically the presence of peace-keeping forces often becomes more necessary after the chaos of war), but rather about the heavy-handed economic and political intervention of bodies like NATO and the IMF. Reconstruction on the cheap is another aspect of neo-liberalism's obsession with the bottom line.

In Bosnia and Herzegovina, economic and political life is gradually being regularized under the custodial control of the

6. M. Cohn, 'The Myth of Humanitarian Intervention in Kosovo', in A. Jokic (ed.), *Lessons of Kosovo: The Dangers of Humanitarian Intervention*, Peterborough, Broadview Press, 2003, p. 121.

Office of the High Representative (OHR). However, the country is caught between this outside authority, with its adjudicating power to veto any parliamentary decision, and a series of parliaments with no interest in ruling for more than vested interests. It is no wonder that despite the changes, there is a continuing economic culture of corruption, bribes and tax evasion — phenomena euphemistically called the 'grey economy'. The huge petrol station complexes along the main roads testify to the quick wealth generated by the corrupt old guard of the former regime. But this is capitalism, and apparently the best way of dealing with such corruption is to ignore it and hope simply to overwhelm it with the new economics. Thus the new guard, ranging all the way from the OHR to the new entrepreneurs and business people, have passionately taken on the language of neo-liberalism. It speaks of bulldozing through the old ways with new policies of privatization, development and return-on-investment. In the process the need for reconciling with the past, including the recent history of concentration camps, genocidal rape and mass killings, is being left to the private memories and muted discussions of individuals and families.

Under neo-liberalism mixed with vested interest, reconstruction may be half working for a minority of the population, but reconciliation is failing completely. In Omarska, the steel factory is again running, but there is no recognition that the factory complex was the site of a camp for ethnic cleansing. In Prijedor, the Karatrem warehouse complex is functioning, but there is no monument to the people who were murdered there when it operated as a concentration camp.

In Trnopolje, a new bitumen road runs from Kozarac. It was built, with US money, to support the return of Muslims (the new politically correct term is 'Bosniaks') to an area that had been badly affected by Serbian militia groups during the 1992 war. A sign at the end of the road shows two male hands in firm embrace above a stars-and-stripes shield. The sign reads 'USAID Community Reintegration and Stabilization Program'. The contractors were Parsons Delawere Inc. and Integral Inzinjering. The completion date is recorded as 25 August 2003. However, also along the Trnopolje road, just outside what looks like a rundown school, local Serbian authorities have built a heavy concrete eagle-shaped monument to remember the fallen Serbs. The central metal plaque

has a message written in the Cyrillic script; it translates as, 'To the fighters who built their lives into the foundations of the Serb Republic'. Below is a cross, the cross of the Orthodox Church, and to the left is another plaque with a poem by Petar Kocic addressing the figure of 'Freedom': 'Many epochs, generations and poets have glorified you. A lot of blood has been spilt for you and in your name'.

It does not make sense. What war of glory is the monument referring to? Who were the people who lost their lives in that war? The plastic flowers at the base of the monument are new, just like the monuments in Prijedor. Despite the failure of Serbian ultra-nationalism in the 1992-95 war, here it is still being celebrated, veiled behind a possible reference to the fight against Fascism in World War II. The signs are everywhere of the glorification of Serbia. Around the adjacent towns one of the common graffiti marks is the sign of the four 'Ss': '*Samo, Sloga, Srbe, Spasava*' — 'Only Unity will Save the Serbs'.

The monument in fact reverses the tragedy of the place: Bosnians, not Serbs, died in this place, and no road signs with male hands shaking are likely to lead the locals to forget. In the area of Trnopolje and Prijedor, 3271 bodies were recovered from mass and single graves dating from the period of the 1992-95 war. Even the Cyrillic alphabet, with which the plaques are engraved, replaces the Latin script used by the community which was once the predominant cultural group in that area, Bosnian Muslims.

During the period of May-December 1992, the school at Trnopolje was turned into a concentration camp to carry out the unofficial policy of ethnic cleansing. Thousands of Bosnian Muslims were interned here, many tortured and killed, with many more sent away in buses never to be seen again. By the end of 1992 the place was re-presented to the Red Cross and visiting journalists as a 'Collection Centre for Refugees'. (The local Red Cross of the Serb Republic had been one of the many Karadzic-controlled agencies directly involved in executing the policy of ethnic cleansing.) The barbed wire fences were partly removed and the checkpoints presented as there for the protection of the refugees.

After the war, instead of creating a memorial to the dead and interned — as the German authorities did for those killed in Auschwitz — the municipal authorities covered up the dead and effectively created a monument to those who perpetrated crimes

against humanity. Similarly, in the main street in Trnopolje a book vendor prominently displays a book extolling the virtues of Radovan Karadzic — a politician now in hiding and wanted for supporting those very war crimes. It is not an old book, like the tomes by Tito still on sale on market stalls. This book was published in 2003. The front cover shows a benign saggy-eyed man in a suit and tie; the back cover has photographs of him variously holding a baby and pointing at a map of the region. Inside is a collection of poems extolling the 'legendary virtues' of the man — 'classics' like 'Karadzic, the Giant from Durmitor' and 'Resurrection of the Day of the Battle of Kosovo'. It is extraordinary propaganda, right down to the 'oral poem' attributed to 'Unknown':

It is not true that Radovan is hiding.
He thinks only of when he will go to Serbia
To wake up the sleeping people
And to light up the candle of freedom.

Radovan Karadzic, charged over the three-and-half-year siege of Sarajevo in which 10,000 civilians were killed, has been in hiding now for seven years. That he remains at large is only possible because of a groundswell of continuing support for him. Meanwhile, far away in The Hague, at the International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia, Slobodan Milosevic (though not Karadzic or Mladic, also at large) is rightly being judged for crimes against humanity. The problem is that trying Milosevic only gets at a peak representative of a much deeper problem. The feeling on the ground in places like Trnopolje is very qualified. What is the Office of the High Representative doing about it in Bosnia? Given the complexity of the situation, it is unable to do very much at all. As noted above, it has put its faith in neo-liberalism, and it is not working. In conjunction with a group called the Bulldozer Committee, it puts out its own propaganda, complete with man-and-baby on the back cover. This time it is not Karadzic but rather an unknown young father-figure wearing a t-shirt and pointing optimistically into the future. The booklet, called 'Privatization', was also published in 2003. It represents the other side of the problems faced by a country under the pressure of economic 'humanitarian intervention'.

What kind of benefits would transparent and effective privatization bring to the people of Bosnia and Herzegovina? The answer is simple: more investment, more production, more jobs, more exports, more tax revenue, more regional development. The list of benefits is long.⁷

If only reconstruction and reconciliation were so simple. If only bulldozers could solve the world's problems. However, as we have seen in places such as Palestine they have become part of the continuing chaos of war-torn regions.

7. 'Privatization: What it is, How it Works, Why I Should Care', Trnopolje, Bulldozer Committee, August 2003, p. 1.