After the Emergency: Community Peace-Building in Bosnia

*by Iain Guest**

In recent years the focus of international attention has shifted from peace-keeping to "peace-building" in war-torn societies. This is a relatively new departure for the United Nations system, but experience suggests that rebuilding these societies will be every bit as difficult as persuading them to stop fighting. This is particularly true of countries that are divided along ethnic or religious lines.

Iain Guest, a Senior Fellow at the United States Institute of Peace in Washington, has visited Bosnia. He concludes that instead of trying to impose multi-ethnic structures on countries like Bosnia, the international community would be better advised to work with the villages where people have common problems that cut across ethnic lines.

Early in 1994, representatives from Bosnia's Croats and Muslims met in Washington and agreed to settle a bitter year-long war and form a joint Federation. This "entity" has since assumed a legal identity, and it features as one of the two components in the new federal Bosnia that was defined at the Dayton peace talks in late 1995.

But does it actually exist in the villages of Bosnia? Generally, no. Throughout central Bosnia, Croat and Muslim communities still live and act as if war could break out again at any moment. The former front line may not exist on the map, but it certainly exists in the mind.

The same is true of countries all over the world that are struggling to recover from "ethnic conflict": Somalia, Sudan, Uganda, Northern Ireland Whether or not these are indeed "ethnic" in the sense of being caused by deep and ancient feuds is highly controversial. But this hardly matters for the policy makers What matters is the fact that these wars leave communities devastated, embittered, and mutually suspicious. Healing the wounds of these wars is proving to be far more complicated than anyone ever imagined

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The Dayton Agreement is something of a model. This is not simply because so much is at stake and because the threat of war remains very real, but because the lessons learned are so relevant to peace-building elsewhere in the world

Looked at closely, however, the Dayton formula is surprisingly simplistic. Dayton called for elections to be held by 14 September 1996 with a view to creating several unified, central institutions. These included a joint three-person presidency, comprising a Croat, a Muslim and a Serb; a Bosnian parliament; a central bank; and a string of other bodies dealing with such war time legacies as human rights and compensation for returning refugees. In each case the assumption was that multi-ethnicity could be *imposed.*

Pessimists would say that this has played into the hands of the nationalists and hastened the disintegration of Bosnia. The elections resulted in a triumph for the three main political parties All are ethnically-based, and two are openly committed to in-

dependence from Bosnia. The three members of the presidency wrangled through nine sessions before they were able to appoint a cabinet.

It is time for Bosnia's friends to look for other ways of helping Bosnians who are still committed to a multi-ethnic country.

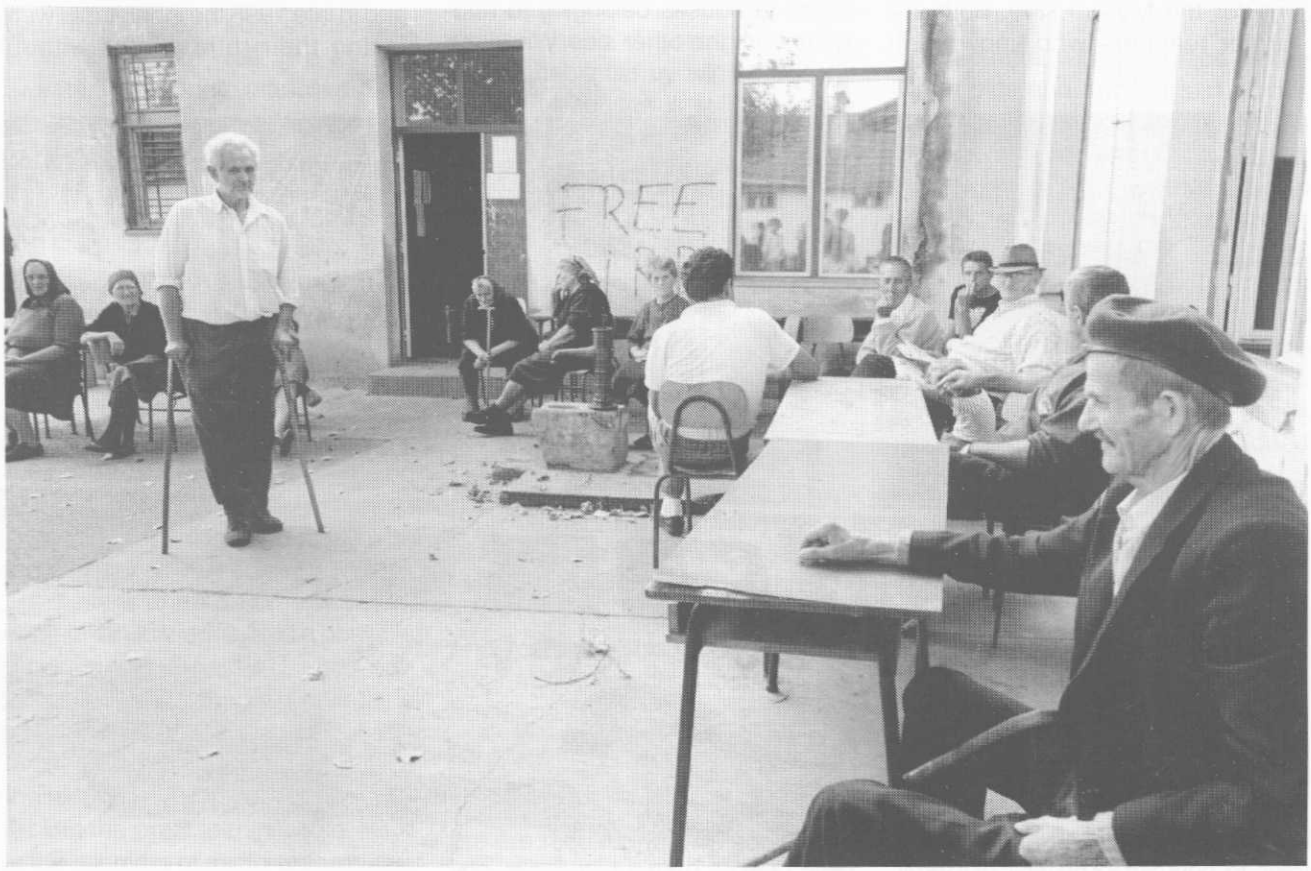
This should start with the geography. Forty-nine of Bosnia's 109 *obstinas* (municipalities) have been divided by the Dayton cease-fire line. In some cases, the front line passes through the middle of town. Here, ethnic groups on both sides of the line have no alternative but to live and work together.

One of these split communities is called Gornji Vakuf. Here, Croats and Muslims blasted at each other for almost a year across the main street, and both sides remain incredibly scarred. But the physical damage pales in comparison to the psychological divisions. This small town comprises two separate communities, each with their own names, mayors, education system, churches, shops, standard of living, wage differentials, police uniforms, currencies and pensions. When the Croats and Muslims finally agreed on a cease-fire, and sat down to draw up an acceptable boundary line between the two communities, they could not agree on ownership of a prominent house on the main street: both sides have been squabbling about who owns which room ever since.

Putting up the lights: stories of separate communities

The Croats insist on calling their side Uskoplje, and refuse to be included in the recognized municipality. Two years after the cease-fire, there are almost no organized crossings from one side to another – a distance of twenty yards. Both sides find it hard to even agree on the direction of traffic around the traffic circles which they share in common. As a result, Gornji Vakuf has more than its fair share of accidents. The food is cheaper on the Muslim side, but the best mechanic lives in Croat territory. Croat police and teachers are paid up to 500 deutsche marks a month, Muslims receive only 50. Croats can call Zagreb - two hundred miles away -for the price of a local call. They cannot telephone families living on the other side of the main road.

Outsiders who want to play a useful role in a town like this have to go to extraordinary lengths to get simple things done. The United Methodist Committee on Relief (UMCOR), wanted to repair street lighting. It had to spend more time trying to find contractors and workers on both sides than it did putting up the lights.



UNHCR/A. Kazinierakis

Separate communities approaching daily negotiation tables

Empty words equal empty houses

The greatest obstacle to community peace-building normally comes from the local politicians. Under the Federation system, the minority in each municipality chooses the president of the interim municipal council, and his deputy comes from the majority. This formula has resulted in at least one success story in one town. The town has a Muslim majority and a Croat president, who is respected as a prominent local surgeon and for his decision to remain during the war. He has been receptive to programmes which stress reintegration, and allowed back refugees from the minority. But he is the rare exception.

The political situation in Gornji Vakuf is complicated. On paper, this is a single Federation municipality, with a Croat serving as head of the interim council and a Bosnian as mayor. In reality, the town has two mayors, one for the Croat side and one for the Muslim side. Both are former teachers who know each other well, but neither has been elected. Instead, they have been appointed by the two main nationalist parties, the (Croat) HDZ, and the (Muslim) SDA. Both have done their best to prevent any reconciliation between the two groups.

Both are committed to the separatist platforms of their parties, and this has weakened a multimillion dollar USAID housing programme in Gornji Vakuf. USAID's rules require that housing grants in the Federation benefit both sides, in the hope of promoting reintegration (known as a "joint use" requirement.) But USAID also requires that its projects go through the political authorities, which makes it easy for Gornji Vakuf's two mayors to block anything which would encourage reintegration. As a result, USAID has spent US $500,000 on repairing an equal number of houses on both sides of the divide in Gornji Vakuf, but without achieving anything for reintegration. Neither mayor has allowed the repair of houses belonging to refugees from the other side. When the Austrian Government offered 20 million deutsche marks to rebuild Bistrica, a small Croat village inside the Muslim area, the (Muslim) mayor of Gornji Vakuf refused the gift outright rather than dilute his Muslim base of support.

In this kind of context, any outside assistance risks widening, rather than bridging, the gap. The Danish Refugee Council constructed two large, elegant houses on either side of the divide, working through the two pre-war owners. But the two landowners have long since moved, and wanted to make money, not promote reintegration. The two mayors on either side did a deal, and the houses are now empty, awaiting tenants from the majority.

Starting with glass

How can agencies get around such obstacles? UMCOR started with window glass. According to one assessment, Gornji Vakuf was the third most destroyed town in Bosnia, and in late 1995 the inhabitants were facing their third winter without

Goods make it through new glasses

windows. UMCOR staff did an analysis on both sides with a view to replacing windows, and got to know individual families. They found that the women yearned for peace. UMCOR talked to the owner of the main restaurant, known as the Federation cafe, which lies on the main street but on the Croat side. Twenty-one Muslim women came to the cafe one afternoon for a tearful reunion with Croats.

During the war, a Serb woman had crossed over and exchanged her knitting for tea. Building on this idea, the women began to conceive a modest micro-enterprise Using a grant of US $10,000 from UMCOR, they rented a house and purchased yarn They then knitted socks and sweaters for UNPROFOR soldiers. These women knew about credit and banking, unlike the refugee women from Tuzla. They also knew how to pool their resources and work together. In a tiny example of multi-ethnic cooperation, they found that the Croat women were better at knitting traditional Croat socks (*cerapi*), which sold quite well. The Muslim sweaters were more attractive. Several committees were established, on finance, design and markets Schooled by UMCOR in exploiting opportunities, they knitted a sweater for Hilary Rodham Clinton.

This initiative has found it difficult to identify markets for a product – handicrafts – which is very little in demand in Bosnia itself. The project was taken over by an international group of volunteers, who arrived in Gornji Vakuf with a grant from the United Nations office in Vienna to promote community development. The volunteers exploited their contacts to seek out markets abroad: some sweaters were taken to Vienna, and a possible buyer found in Norway The best outlet has been provided by Oxfam, the British aid agency, whose international network of shops specializes in Third World handicrafts.

But the profit is minuscule Here is the dilemma of micro-enterprises: if they are to become commercially self-sufficient, they cannot rely on outside grants. But how can they make money without markets? Furthermore, if socks sell better than sweaters, should the profit be shared equally between the Croat and Muslim women, or go back to the Croats who made them?

Nonetheless, it is this kind of patient, low-profile work with individuals that produces the breakthroughs. This is most evident on housing, which is the most urgent of all reconstruction tasks. Most of the larger donors, like USAID and UNHCR, are prevented from using their housing funds to bridge the ethnic divisions because they are formally required to work with recognized authorities.

Integration by cooperation rather than imposition

UNHCR's approach is to repair the houses of refugees and displaced families by providing them with roofing and other material. The aim is to help especially vulnerable families and select houses where there is a realistic hope of getting two main rooms habitable by winter. But the choice of houses is still left to the municipalities. As a result, said one UNHCR official, the selection is often not based on real need. But if UNHCR made the selection, the chances are that no repairs would be done at all.

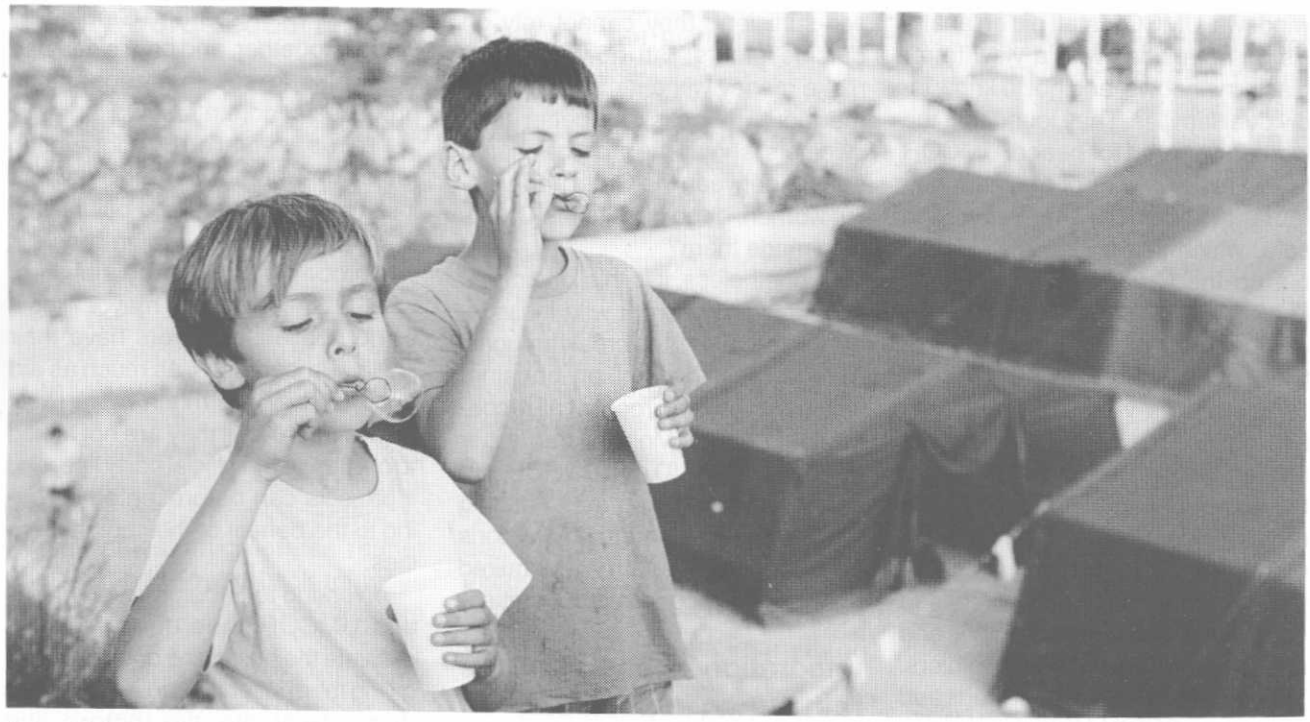
The team of international volunteers working in Gornji Vakuf has managed to use housing to bring both sides together, by combining different approaches and adding some low-paid hard work of their own. Working with two secondary school teachers, one from either side, they identify houses to be repaired on both sides. The two lists are exchanged and approved. This raises no objections from the authorities, because the home-owners are from the majority. But as a condition for receiving materials, and technical advice from the volunteers, all of the home-owners are required to help each other with the actual labour. Twenty-eight houses had been repaired by August, scores of Bosnians and Croats had worked together, and both sides had been able to see that cooperation produces concrete results

This is integration by cooperation rather than imposition. If outsiders insist on integration, and build it into their formal project requirements it will probably have to be resisted, whether the individual mayor likes it or not, because mayors have their political imperatives, as much as aid donors They are much more likely to give approval if they are not asked to challenge the official party line, and if projects can be presented as being to the benefit of their constituencies.

Working together, the volunteers and UMCOR have quietly tried to cultivate the politicians on both sides, giving them incentives to avoid, rather than retreat into, the rhetoric and propaganda of their parties. Both men are committed nationalists, but they are also teachers and parents. As a result, after hundreds of hours of pleading and cajoling, they approved the establishment of a joint youth centre, with one office on the Croat side and another just across the street in Muslim territory. This is stocked with books and computers, and employs eight teachers, again from the two communities. Parents from both sides also use the centre. The mayors raised no objections when teachers from both sides came together under the auspices of the volunteers, and drew up a common list of books for the library in the event of its being repaired: the list included the Bible and the Koran.

Community peace-building requires imagination

Some important lessons are being learned in Gornji Vakuf. First and foremost, while local politicians are certainly opposed to reintegration, they are not immovable. But it takes a fantastic amount of dedication and hardwork Many government and World Bank projects do not have the time or inclination for this kind of total immersion



UNHCR/A. Hollmann

Peaceful co-existence, a dream come true

Trade-offs and linkages are inevitable, and self-interest can be appealed to. But if a promise is made and broken, it will be harder the next time around. Even when promoting integration between the ethnic groups, the agencies are realistic.

"Ethnic integration" need not mean close cohabitation. Like most Bosnian cities, Gornji Vakuf had clearly-defined quarters where Muslims and Croats lived and socialized. There were only six mixed marriages. In spite of this, there was respect and cooperation. This was an "integrated" society.

While the clock cannot be turned back on four years of war, Croats and Bosnians can still coexist and committed outsiders have an indispensable role to play in helping them. But integration has to be defined through practical concerns, like education, traffic, and the security of children. In such areas, both communities will work with each other if they can be shown that it lies in their interest to do so. Even the politicians will find it hard to block. The trick, then, is to identify common concerns that do not pose an overt political threat, and develop contacts with respected leaders on both sides. This requires imagination.

This kind of community peace-building will require flexibility from international agencies like the World Bank, which is used to dealing with very large sums of money and working through the State authorities. But some seeds have already been sown. The author visited a micro-enterprise for refugee women in the town of Tuzla, supported by the Bank. This is an imaginative start, although it may be difficult to sustain unless project managers are willing to select beneficiaries on the basis of their commercial ability, as opposed to need.

It is another matter altogether to use micro-credit to bring different ethnic groups together. This has been attempted in Gornji Vakuf, where Muslim and Croat women have made sweaters and socks. But they now need outside technical assistance and help in finding markets.

These are exciting, worthwhile schemes, with a significance far beyond Bosnia. But we also need to be aware of their limitations. The risk in this kind of community peace-building is that it leads to one-off experiments which can fragment a programme of national reconstruction and actually accelerate segregation.

Perhaps the biggest challenge with such grass-roots community programmes is how to replicate them on a larger scale. It is easy to burrow down into an appealing individual community, without asking whether this individual effort can be replicated elsewhere and applied nationally. If the answer is no, it will not be sustainable. Indeed, concentrating on single communities can accentuate the fragmentation of Bosnia. Somehow, international agencies have to figure out a way of turning inspired experiments, like Gornji Vakuf, into a national programme.

It is clearly worth the effort. If we can get it right in Gornji Vakuf, why not in Mogadishu, Beirut and Belfast?

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