

Croatia

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PRESS BRIEFING ON UNTAES

The United Nations Transitional Administrator for Eastern Slavonia, Baranja and Western Sirmium, Jacques Klein, told correspondents at a Headquarters briefing yesterday, 26 June, that he was in New York to brief the Security Council on developments in his area of operation, on which the Secretary-General had just issued a report (document S/1997/487).

After reviewing how the United Nations Transitional Administration for Eastern Slavonia, Baranja and Western Sirmium (UNTAES), which he heads, was established and deployed, he said that the mission was at its most difficult phase, dealing with the return of displaced persons to the region. He was asking the Council to extend UNTAES' mandate up to January 1998 and to retain the executive portion of that assignment at least through October, with a review at that time. The executive part of the mandate would enable UNTAES to govern Eastern Slavonia. He had also asked the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) to take up the UNTAES mandate after the United Nations operation leaves in January. An OSCE mission of 150 to 200 personnel would be required for at least two years because many of the agreements with the Croatian Government would go out from 1998 to the year 2000. He thanked the various States that had contributed to the mission for its success.

"What intrigues me about the mission is that, with no commonality of doctrine, no commonality of language, no commonality of equipment, we have forged an enormously successful mission", he said.

With the region's local Serbs leaving constantly, a reporter asked, how could the mission ensure a return of the region's multi-ethnic character? He replied that about 10 per cent of the region's population had left. But, those who left sometimes did so for short spells, for instance, to take pieces of furniture across the border to property they had outside Croatia. Last Tuesday, for example, 31,000 people, 12,000 vehicles, with 780 trucks or buses, had crossed the border. During the existence of the former Yugoslavia, the Serbs had tended to dominate Croatia, being, for example, professors of history at Zagreb University, the police, the management and the infrastructure. Their population had dropped from 12 per cent to about 5 per cent. For many of them, it was not only a loss of power, but also a sense of whether they could see themselves living in a Croatian State, which was not an easy decision to make. There was no precipitous departure of people, though. While some Serb nationalists would not feel comfortable in a Croatian State, a majority of the people wanted to stay. About 72 per cent of them had voted in recent elections, denoting their readiness to stay where they might have better choices than in refugee camps in the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia.

In response to a follow-up question, he added that, since more than 100,000 Serbs had not left the region, the issue before the mission was how to help keep them there. The fact that five Serbs were serving as Vice-Ministers in Zagreb and other factors should encourage them to stay in the region.

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Asked to comment on what usually led to incidents of atrocities by United Nations peace-keepers recently reported in the media, Mr. Klein said they were caused by lack of effective leadership and of command and control. The existence of a good commander and good officers would produce good performance by the soldiers in a mission. No atrocities had been committed by UNTAES soldiers and, in fact, the local population was concerned that they would be leaving. The UNTAES had four basic battalions from Pakistan, Jordan, Belgium and the Russian Federation, all made up of professional soldiers. It also had Slovak engineers, Czech surgical team, Ukrainian helicopter pilots, an Indonesian field hospital company, which gave free treatment in exchange, sometimes, for a return of hidden weapons. Relations between the local population and UNTAES troops were sound.

In response to a question on how many guns and pieces of ammunition had been collected by the medical teams, he said that, while UNTAES had demilitarized the region, the mission had allocated money for a buy-back programme which had recovered 6,733 rifles, more than 5,000 anti-tank rocket launchers, 12,000 grenades and 1,349,000 rounds of ammunition at below market rates. Sometimes people called him to volunteer information that they lived on top of arms caches. "One individual called me and said, 'look I have a ton and a half of explosives in my basement', and I said 'I hope you don't smoke'", he told reporters.

The weapons collected in that manner ranged from 1920's vintage arms to the modern ones of Yugoslav manufacture, he continued. The British Museum and similar institutions had inquired whether they could acquire some of them for display. He was concerned about the number of people who might be hiding weapons without reporting them. He went to churches in various villages to appeal to mothers and grandmothers to persuade their sons, grandsons or sons-in-law to get rid of weapons they could be hiding.

Asked whether he would extend the buy-back programme to New York, he said: "Well, I think there is nothing more dangerous than armed newsmen."

In response to a question on whether he would be appointed as a deputy to Carlos Westendorp, the new High Representative for Implementation of the Peace Agreement on Bosnia and Herzegovina, he said he had not been formally nominated. He would not reject the proposals of his Government.

Asked whether the success of UNTAES meant that some United States officials had been wrong in demanding that Eastern Slavonia should have been run by the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), he said the operation in the region became a United Nations mission because the commitment to Bosnia and Herzegovina had taken up all available NATO resources. But the mission had been provided NATO air cover.

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