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Bosnia no model of nation-building

By Sara Terry

LOS ANGELES - I never caught the American congresswoman's name, but I doubt I'll be forgetting her words anytime soon.

It was mid-May. I was in an apartment in Sarajevo, getting ready to head out for a day of work, with my ear half-tuned to CNBC. The program centered on a debate about postwar Iraq and whether the United States should be planning a long-term commitment to "nation-building" in that country.

What finally caught my full attention were the congresswoman's words, almost parenthetically dropped into a longer comment about Iraq: "Well, when we've been successful in nation-building in the past, as in Bosnia and Kosovo, it's because we've stayed a while."

Bosnia? A successful example of nation-building? I couldn't believe what she had just casually declared. This might have seemed unremarkable to anyone who hasn't followed events in this Balkan nation since war ended in 1995. But I've been working on a photo documentary project about the aftermath of war in Bosnia-Herzegovina since the fall of 2000 and to call Bosnia a success story is to ignore all the ways nation-building has failed to take root here.

To be sure, the presence of the international community has made a huge difference in a country that was nearly torn apart by nationalistic rivalries. Thousands of homes destroyed in the war have been rebuilt with international aid; a multitude of social-service and civic-minded programs funded by foreign donors have helped seed a local network of homegrown, nongovernmental organizations; and the international community - in the form of the Office of the High Representative (OHR), which still has the final say in the country - has pushed (sometimes forced) legal reforms aimed at ending ethnic and religious discrimination.

It all sounds like nation-building. It is. But it's no success - yet.

For one thing, the country's postcommunist, postconflict economy is still a shambles: The unemployment rate is 49 percent. For another, the electoral process has failed to deliver badly needed visionary leadership; in fact, Bosnians have become so discouraged with the process that about half of eligible voters stayed home from the polls last fall. As a result, the same nationalist parties that were considered to be a huge part of Bosnia's postwar problems back in 1996 - and which had been out of power in recent years - were voted back in.

There are many other examples of "nation-building" in Bosnia that have yet to achieve even the semblance of a sturdy foundation. But perhaps the most worrisome is the division created in the country by the 1995 Dayton Peace Accords, the very agreements meant to reunite and stabilize the country.

Under Dayton, a national government was set up to handle foreign, economic, and fiscal policy - it's a tripartite presidency (with Muslim, Eastern Orthodox, and Roman Catholic representatives), a parliament, and a ministry of foreign affairs. Under that umbrella are two internal governing entities: The Bosniak/Croat Federation is mainly Muslim and Catholic Croats who make up 52 percent of the population of Bosnia-Herzegovina. The Serb Republic (RS), with 48 percent of the nation's population, is made up almost entirely of Orthodox Serbs.

At the time, negotiators believed it was the only way to end the war. After all, Bosnian Serbs, supported

and incited by neighboring Serbia, had tried to take over the entire country, or at least to split it with Croatia. The idea was that Bosnian Serbs would find peace a more palatable proposition if they were granted control over land that borders Serbia (even if under the umbrella of "one" Bosnia).

In practice, that idea is badly flawed. Giving Serbs a form of autonomy over territory that they "ethnically cleansed" during the war has had the unintended effect of rewarding their aggression - which included driving thousands of Muslims from their homes and killing or raping thousands more. Apart from legal reforms forced by the OHR, and changes brought on by the threat of withholding financial aid, Serbs have had little reason to reflect on - or regret - their countrymen's deeds during the war. In fact, the top two indicted Bosnian Serb war criminals - Radovan Karadzic and Ratko Mladic - remain at large, enjoying an almost mythic heroic status among their fellow Serbs.

This was all brought home to me in May as I traveled through the Serb Republic. My Serb interpreter was a young woman whose family had fled the town of Bugojno at the beginning of the war - a town that now sits in the Bosniak-Croat "federation" half of the country.

I asked her how Serbs in the RS felt about Bosnia. "Look," she said. "I love Bosnia. It's where I'm from. I grew up there. But I don't live there anymore. I live in the RS." Surprised, I tried to explain to her that the RS is, in fact, in Bosnia. But she would have none of it.

"It's like this," she said. "You're an American. It's where you're from. But then you move to Sweden. You're still from America, you just don't live there anymore."

"No," I tried explaining again. "It's like this: I live in California. Let's say I move to Texas. I still live in America. You live in the RS. You still live in Bosnia."

I don't think she ever got the point. Like many Bosnian Serbs, she prefers to think of the RS as its own place, separate from Bosnia. Some Serbs in the RS will even openly admit that their dream is still to one day be united with "Mother Serbia."

What worries me even more, is that obviously the American congresswoman I heard on CNBC hasn't gotten the point either.

Bosnia is not a success story - not yet. I think it can be. But not if the US or the international community pats itself on the back and walks away, moving on to create a new chapter of "successful" nation-building in some other shattered country.

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