

American and Serbian armed forces begin to close historic rift

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NEAR STUBLINA, Kosovo — No matter what the boundary, modern borders start as lines on a map, argued and negotiated by men and women who might never see what those lines demarcate. Like so many other things here in Kosovo, the Administrative Boundary Line (ABL) is more of a suggestion than a rule. Drafted after the 1999 NATO intervention in this province of Serbia, the ABL, which runs several hundred miles, roughly matches the established provincial borders but there are no fences, no massive guard towers to mark what is Serbia and what is United Nations administered Kosovo.

Recently the United States Army, part of the international Kosovo Force (KFOR), began conducting synchronized patrols with their Serbian counterparts along the ABL. These patrols, which are conducted four to six times a month, have brought together former enemies in an effort not only to provide a safe and secure environment but to allow soldiers and officers to familiarize themselves with each other and hopefully allow for a better working relationship between the former adversaries.

“Security and stability is important to both sides,” Capt. Mark Lepp, an officer of the California National Guard who is in charge of organizing the patrols, said in an interview. After months of negotiations and back and forth, the first synchronized patrols started in November 2004, much to the amazement of civilians on both sides of the boundary line. Serbian and American soldiers working together was something many people thought would never happen given the fact that just six years ago they were actively engaged in hostilities.

“Every soldier is honored to be a part of these patrols,” said Major Sladjan Pesic of the Serbian and Montenegrin Army after a recent patrol. “For the population it makes the point that the Serbian and Montenegrin Army can work with the Americans,” he added, citing the capture of several smugglers since the synchronized patrols began.

On a recent fall day the hills along the ABL were full of color and an unseasonably warm breeze passed through the trees. A group of National Guardsmen had driven to a predetermined spot near the ABL and waited for their Serbian counterparts to arrive. There was no nervousness among the group of soldiers as a middle-aged staff sergeant reminded them of the procedures for what would be a brief initial encounter. The most important thing, he reminded, was that no one should point



Members of the Serbian and Montenegrin Army look on as their commander meets with an American soldier to discuss the route of a synchronized patrol. (Damaso Reyes photos)

their weapons at anyone else. Shortly after the lecture soldiers were checking their gear, making sure they had all their equipment and, most importantly, something to trade with the Serbians.

In the long tradition of

the synchronized patrols became abundantly clear. For a few minutes a month, these soldiers have an opportunity to get to know each other not from media reports or secondhand rumors but from direct experience.



An American and Serbian and Montenegrin soldier pose for a photograph at the end of a successful synchronized patrol along the Administrative Boundary Line.

armies everywhere, these soldiers take every opportunity to trade patches, hats and whatever else they can with their foreign counterparts. After a ten-minute meeting between the officers on each side that was respectful but far from warm, the Americans and Serbians drove and walked along their respective sides of the ABL, rendezvousing three times over the course of several hours.

At the end of the patrol, soldiers from both sides gathered around the vehicles that brought them and chatted through an interpreter and began to trade patches, magazines and sunglasses. The earlier formality had by then drained away, and the impact of

“There aren’t a lot of big differences; we’re basically the same,” said Nebojaovnovic, a non-commissioned officer in the Serbian and Montenegrin Army. “In the beginning [of his career] we didn’t have any contact with the U.S. Army, but now we have an opportunity to see what kind of soldiers they are and vice versa. We have a good relationship now,” he added.

“Overall I think it has actually exceeded expectations,” said Capt. Lepp. “A lot of the guys who go on patrol now can recognize and know by name the other side,” he added.

As the final status of Kosovo is decided during future multi-lateral negotiations, good working relations between KFOR and the Serbian and Montenegrin Army are essential. Synchronized patrols are a far cry from joint patrols but rather than staring at each other from opposing sides these two militaries have started down a road that will ultimately make both Kosovo and Serbia more secure.

INTERNATIONAL NEWS

AUTHOR CHINUA ACHEBE DECRIES ‘LANGUAGE COLONIALISM’

Oct. 31 (GIN) - Nigeria’s celebrated novelist Chinua Achebe has called on contemporary African writers to give priority to their mother tongue to lessen the negative consequences of colonialism on African arts and culture.

He also called for the revival of Africa’s dying oral traditions of story telling, which he considers unique.

The Panafrican News Agency quoted the world-famous author recalling that his generation of African writers, because of their education, wrote in the language of the colonial masters, in his own case English, since Nigeria was colonized by Britain.

“It looked as if we had a choice, but in reality, there was no choice,” said Achebe, whose epic novel “Things Fall Apart” (1958), which has been translated into many widely spoken languages, depicts the confrontation between African and Western cultures using his native Igboland in eastern Nigeria as the setting.

Achebe was speaking on a BBC arts program called “The Ticket.”

The laureate of many international literary prizes and awards admitted that he and his colleagues were victims of “language colonialism,” because the colonial administrations ensured that the colonized people lived, worked and communicated in the language of the colonizers.

But in this post-colonial era, he said, the old trend must be reversed so that Africa does not continue to lose its rich arts and cultural heritage.

Starting with himself, Achebe said he had made sure that seven of his famous poems were translated into his native Igbo language.

On Africa’s threatened oral traditions, widely used in pre-colonial times, he said while “written, televised or photographed,” traditions had evolved, Africans must not allow oral traditions to die.

The 75-year-old African literary giant lives in the United States, where he teaches and continues to add to his growing list of works.

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AFRICAN WRITER WANTS AFFORDABLE BOOKS

Oct. 31 (GIN) - Exiled Zimbabwean writer Chenjerai Hove says that government-imposed sales taxes are punishing Africans who want to read but are unable to afford the high cost of today’s books.

Chenjerai, a critic of the Mugabe government who currently lives in Norway, has published poetry, novels, essays and reflections.

He recalled a past Zimbabwe International Book Fair where he signed so many books that his fingers developed blisters.

And that experience was shared with other writers and poets such as Yvonne Vera, Chirikure Chirikure, Charles Mungoshi and Shimmer Chinodya (Ben Chirasha) who were also busy signing dozens of books.

“A few years ago, I was busy signing autographs on newspapers and pieces of paper,” said Chenjerai. “Now, no one can afford the books anymore.”

Materials for producing books, like inks, newsprint, printing plates, and the essential technology, are all taxed on the same rate as bolts and spare parts for cars.

Chenjerai condemned the current thrust of education systems in Africa, many of which are examination-oriented. Students are never taught to read books as a pleasurable experience in itself without thinking of exams.

Universities and colleges are producing what I call the “new illiterates,” he said. “They have their degrees and diplomas, but hardly take time to sit and enjoy reading good books.”

It is sad, he said, “when I realize that African books are read more outside the continent than inside.”

Development is more than bridges, school buildings, clinics, hospitals and roads, he warned. But for some governments, he added, the African mind is the least of their priorities.

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