

# The Siege of Sarajevo



## A battle to stay sane in Sarajevo

TODD BENSMAN  
Times Correspondent  
The St. Petersburg Times  
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Column One

SARAJEVO, Bosnia-Herzegovina- The first artillery shell hurtled into the neighborhood whining like a buzz saw and exploded with a dish-rattling roar just as the Salkic family was settling down to late-afternoon coffee.

Sitting around a small living room table in their sixth-floor apartment, Edin and Fika Salkic locked eyes, wondering whether they should take their two boys and Edin's 65-year-old mother to the building's basement bomb shelter.

They all know the routine by now.

They live in a building originally made to house athletes at the 1984 Winter Olympics. Now the Salkics just live in fear.

The two boys have hardly been outside for a year.

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The Muslim family has survived the Serbs' 11-month siege of Sarajevo one tenuous day at a time in the ruins of a high-rise that forms a cornerstone of the front line. Their life has been reduced to surviving each day in hopes the next might bring permanent quiet.

"People in our building are going mad," said Salkic, a 34-year-old man with clear gray eyes surrounded by deepening worry lines. "Every day about 100 bombs hit this building or very close. When we feel the danger is greater, we go to the basement. But we lived in that basement for seven months. We can't stand it anymore."

One recent afternoon, mortar rounds exploded on the grounds around their building, but people here have come to regard mortar fire almost casually.

Artillery, however, with its much heavier shells, inspires dread even among the neighborhood's most hardened residents.

The basement is a frosty, foul-smelling dungeon with three inches of frigid water covering the floor. So, for the moment, the Salkices decided to send their sons, 8-year-old Adis and 6-year-old Fedas, into a back bedroom - a room with thick walls - and continue entertaining a visitor over coffee.

"There is no chance that I will ever let my children out of this apartment," said Fika Salkic, a shy, soft-spoken 31-year-old woman with



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brown hair and a kind smile.

"From the beginning of the war they have been inside. Only five times in 11 months have they ventured outside and only for about 10 minutes."

Before the war, Edin worked as a recruiter for the former federal Yugoslav army and Fika was a homemaker who looked after the boys. They were looking forward to improving their lives in an independent, post-communist Bosnia.

But Serbs revolted last year after the republic's Croats and Muslims declared independence from Serb-dominated Yugoslavia, and have captured 70 percent of Bosnia in their drive to create a "Greater Serbia." In recent fighting on Sarajevo's western edge, where the Salkics live, Serbs used tank and artillery fire before the shelling finally abated earlier this week. Nearly a year of war has left the Salkics' residential corner of Bosnia's capital - with its grassy courtyards, parking lots full of burned vehicles and streets reverberating with gunfire - a shattered checkerboard of contested neighborhoods.

Salkic walked home one day recently from his job as a recruiter for the Bosnian army, unstrapped his pistol and told how he had passed six neighbors wounded by a mortar shell just 100 yards away.

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*Typical random building damage in Sarajevo during the siege days. This is not the Salkic apartment building. Photo by Todd Bensman*

"How can a man feel normal?" he complained. "When I went to my job yesterday I passed a massacre, and on my way home today, I saw another one with all this blood. There were pieces of bodies laying all around."

On one side of the Salkics' building, nothing moves in the no man's land leading to Serb positions hidden 150 yards away in broken-down houses. On the building's Bosnian-controlled side, neighborhood residents chat in small groups, chancing mortar and sniper fire for some fresh air. Bosnian soldiers - volunteers from the neighborhood - take turns standing guard at sandbagged positions at the corners of the building.

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The Salkics' home has survived the siege only partly intact. Large chunks of concrete are all that remain of the 7th floor above them. Artillery and tank fire have punched gaping holes through much of the building, leaving apartments on their own floor, to the left and right, blasted ruins.

The Salkics have used heavy wooden bookcases to cordon off the half of their living space that faces Serb positions. The family lives crowded in the three small rooms furthest from the bullets and shrapnel that have churned part of the apartment into plaster of Paris dust. No one has entered that side for almost a year.

"I'm not afraid"

A Serb sniper across the street shoots into the apartment almost every day, including the kitchen where Mrs. Salkic and grandmother Adila prepare the family's meager daily allotment of U.N. food. On this day, two artillery shells exploded somewhere outside. Salkic herded every one into the back bedroom, where for 10 minutes they listened to artillery shells jar the parking lots and courtyards outside.

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The din of rifle shots, machine gun fire and more mortar explosions that followed did not slow until early the next morning.

At the sound of shellfire, 8-year-old Adis bunched up his shoulders and squinted his eyes.

"I'm not afraid; only when they hit into the building," he said.

Salkic said his family stays here because there is nowhere else to live. And, he said, leaving would only affirm the Serb policy of ethnic cleansing.

"This is all we have," Salkic said. "This is what I have put my whole life into. We will never leave this house; only if the building is destroyed or burned up."

They have no electricity or running water and winter has aggravated their struggle. Food is in short supply, as is wood for heat and for cooking on the small living-room stove.

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The Salkics, like Sarajevo's 300,000 other residents, eat only what the United Nations can provide with its on-again, off-again relief mission. It is a starvation diet consisting mostly of starchy foods such as flour, pasta and beans.

Despite the hardship, the boys are energetic and rambunctious, running from room to room and climbing over furniture and people. Pieces of rocket grenades make up a large part of their arsenal of toys and lie scattered around the apartment. The boys seem mostly oblivious to the concussions outside.

"I want the war to stop so I can go walking," Adis said. "I miss TV and cartoons. I miss candy."

Every day, Mrs. Salkic braves shellfire to get water at a neighborhood pump several hundred yards away. Every other day, she searches for wood.

"The morning is the worst part of the day," she said. "Almost every morning they are shooting outside and shells are falling because they know that is when we have to get water and wood. There is nothing you can do against shells. You just go and hope you are lucky. They can get you any time."

About the only pleasure comes at night, when Edin hooks up the black and white television set to a car battery for half an hour. The family gathers around to watch the news under a single dim flashlight bulb somehow powered through the telephone cable. Sometimes neighbors stay the evening chain-smoking and drinking cups of thick Turkish coffee. Fika knits intently.

Tonight's discussion centers around a strange twist in the shelling routine. In the last few days, the Serbs have sent the neighborhood 30-40 defused mortar shells with hand-written notes inside reading: "We want you to know not all Serbs are bad. We are being forced to do this."

To Adila, the dud shells prove there are some good Serbs out there. But, bristling with anger about being sniped at in the kitchen, she said she wishes she could take up a gun herself. Adila was a partisan fighting Nazi occupiers during World War II. Grainy black-and-white photos showing a young Adila as a guerrilla hang proudly on a bedroom wall.

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"I would like to be young in this war so I could fight these barbarians," she said. "I would like to die just to make freedom for my children. I want my grandchildren to be able to make little children."

The next day was Adis' ninth birthday. He spent his eighth birthday in the basement. There will be no party this year either. In the morning, however, Adis' favorite dish was served - a pizza topped with canned sardines. His parents had saved up the ingredients for a week.

Under the Serb siege, the Salkics say they don't have the luxury of thinking much about the future. Until the war ends, there is only the present, a life without dreams.

"This is a living hell," Edin said. "We try only to keep our sanity."

*Editor's note: Times correspondent Todd Bensman was in Sarajevo earlier this month. With communications into the city nearly impossible, it's not known how the Salkics have fared since then.*

***Postscript (2017): Some months after this story was published, a relative informed me by letter that an artillery shell killed 6-year-old Feda Salkic, one of the two boys with whom I spent time interviewing. The letter, excerpted as follows, read: "Chetniks with their heavy artillery grenades killed my little Cousin Freda Salkic in front of his school. He was only six and a half years old. Do you still remember when he was at Alipasino Polje at Sakic's home? You asked him, "Are you afraid of grenades" And he was so nervous. His brother Adis was in classroom when chrappnel killed his teacher and two his friends in a bench in front of him. My family is in great mourning since then. That massacrew was the beginning of many massacres (almost every day) that happened in Sarajevo after that.. That period, from November 1993 to February 1994 was the worlst and bloodiest period in the war."***

## Sarajevo's deep freeze; `Is there still a God in Sarajevo?'

December 21, 1992  
By Todd Bensman  
The St. Petersburg Times



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The 72-year-old Muslim refugee had no wood to keep him and his ill wife warm for the day. So he found an ax and chopped away at the nearest tree in a public park next to the refugee center where the couple shares a tiny room.

"We don't need permission. Who needs permission to survive?" Abdullah said, taking a break from his work and ignoring the two mortar rounds that exploded three blocks away. "Everyone knows we can do nothing but survive each day until we die. We are living like pigs."

Abdullah, who would not give his full name, is not the only one reducing park trees to stumps. He is typical of thousands of Sarajevo residents who are literally cannibalizing this besieged city in a daily struggle to find enough of anything to burn in homemade wood stoves.

Serbian guns knocked out electricity and water throughout most of Sarajevo early on in the 9-month-old war. Now Sarajevo's 280,000 people are contending with a new devil - winter's killing cold. Temperatures are in the teens and 20s.

Sallow-faced residents shuffle through the streets with axes and saws in an increasingly fruitless search for enough wood to last the day. They chop at neighborhood shrubs and trees, tear apart wooden fences and scavenge combustible material from bombed-out buildings. The 150 refugees in the former elementary school where Abdullah lives have resorted to burning classroom carpets, desks and chairs.

"I have 11 disabled and sick people here, and I have my doubts they will survive much longer," said Aieda Herenda, shelter manager. "We allow one fire a day here."

Officials of the United Nations, humanitarian relief organizations and local hospitals say they expect within two weeks to begin adding hypothermia and weather-related starvation victims to Sarajevo's long list of war casualties.

"Our critical period will be in January and the early part of February," said Arif Smajkic, director of Bosnia's Institute for Public Health. "If Sarajevo is still under siege at that time, I am sure we will have many, many victims of the weather."

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Hunger is compounding the problem. Thousands have gone with little or no food since daily U.N. relief flights were suspended more than two weeks ago, and people are weakening from their daily struggle to stay warm, relief and health officials said.

Half of Sarajevo's 42 public relief kitchens, which until recently fed 40,000 people once a day, have stopped operating because there is no wood to fire them, said Slobodan Petroman, a relief worker for the Adventist humanitarian aid group ADRA.

The World Health Organization, in a last-ditch bid to keep down the number of hypothermia casualties, has dispatched 50,000 plastic sleeping bags to Sarajevo.

"This is the first time in my life I am cooking food and heating myself from a fire," said Jasna Lucic, a Sarajevo mother of two who has been tearing up the floorboards of the bombed-out family business for wood. "Before the war, we lived like in the United States - two cars, a big apartment and money. Now we feel like we've gotten into a time machine and traveled 100 years back."

Like many other Sarajevo families, the Lucics have cordoned off one room of their apartment for primary living space. They have covered their shattered windows with plastic sheets donated by the United Nations.

A tiny wood stove produces just enough heat to take the edge off the cold in the room, but the Lucics still are bundled up in ski attire. The family of four can afford to make a fire only twice a day, mainly to cook a small portion of humanitarian aid flour acquired from a friend. They had nothing else to eat during a recent week.

Wood in Sarajevo has become a valuable commodity. Black marketeers are selling about 50 pounds of it for the equivalent of \$120 to those who can afford it. Also, there is strong evidence to suggest that the little U.N. food that does get into the city is being pilfered by local distribution workers and sold on the black market.

Against this backdrop, scenes of desperation and misery pervade. In a graveyard stacked with backlogged coffins, an old man hacked at a tree

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stump for a few precious slivers of wood to burn while gravediggers labored and shells fell nearby.

Three unwashed orphan children burned paper and a discarded shoe to stay warm in a bombed-out building while begging food from passersby who had little to give.

"Sometimes they give us food, sometimes not," said Thomas Man, 12. "The whole day we look for food. We run around and try to stay warm."

Some relief officials say the coming of much-delayed snow will only exacerbate food shortages and the hunt for wood. Bad weather is likely to delay relief flights if they ever resume, and U.N. food trucks coming from the Croatian port of Split will find the uncleared roads of Sarajevo impassable.

Trying with little success to impart some sense of hope about all this is Father Luka Brkovic, a priest at St. Joseph's Catholic Church. He laments that most of his congregation come to his Sunday services for the food. "I try to answer their most common question, which is 'Is there still a God in Sarajevo?' " he said. "All I can do is tell them to have some faith, to give them some hope they need to survive."

## **Bosnians recycle Serbian dud shells into hand grenades; Mechanic's skills useful in Bosnia war**

*Shops in Sarajevo make weapons out of cans, military museum exhibits and faulty unexploded ordinance to defend the city*

TODD BENSMAN

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1993

SARAJEVO, Bosnia-Herzegovina— There was a time not too long ago when people who liked living on the edge brought their ailing high-performance race cars to Bekir Skriel's tiny downtown garage.

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These days, Skriel's customers have traded in their racing uniforms for military garb. And now they bring him Serb mortar, tank and artillery shells that rain down from the surrounding hills but fail to detonate.



He uses his high-precision instruments and surgical-steady hands to convert the shells into hand grenades for Sarajevo's poorly armed defenders.

Skriel boasts his shop can turn 50 United Nations relief soup cans into hand grenades from the powdery contents of a single undetonated artillery shell.

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“When we have a quiet day, there's nothing to find. But on days when they send a thousand bombs, you can find many,” the 52-year-old added cheerfully. “The Serbs can send them to us but here we make ways to send them back.”

Metal canisters once used as traffic signal flares become grenade launching tubes. Common flare guns become hand-held shotguns when Skriel and his three workers finish with them.

Skriel's garage is one of an estimated 20 shops scattered throughout the Bosnian capital that restore, rebuild, and outright invent weapons for the city's sparsely equipped fighters.

Unlike the Serb forces, which pack the modern firepower of the former federal Yugoslav army, the ragtag Bosnian troops started out with only hunting rifles, antique pistols and rusty weapons of past wars. Bosnian forces, most of them Muslims, complain bitterly that the international arms embargo imposed by the United Nations on all the Balkan republics has given them little choice but to make do with the lopsided status quo.

“No one cares about us,” said Alan Lucic, a 19-year-old member of Sarajevo's presidential guard, based near Skriel's garage. “We have to do it ourselves.”

With a little instruction for U.S. and German arms-manufacturing manuals found in the local library, Skriel and his staff made a transition from cars to guns.

“These little shops are keeping the front alive. Without them, Sarajevo would have been lost a long time ago,” said Skriel, a mechanic for 20 years whose only son is on the front line. “No one forced us to do this. We were forced by our suffering to do something. For me, it was not so far to go from repairing high-performance cars to making weapons.”

Skriel's shop, which has taken three direct hits from mortar fire since the war began, is squeezed between the bombed-out ruins of office and apartment buildings.

Amid metal lathes and boring machinery, a long metal work table is cluttered with disassembled pistols, sawed gun barrels, rocket fins, mortar

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shell bodies and grenade bolt pins. Buckets filled with chain links and odd bits of scrap metal intended to be loaded into various munitions stand in an assembly line next to jars of salvaged yellow gunpowder and piles of trigger mechanisms.

The floors are littered with cobwebbed World War I and II machine guns plundered with government approval from Sarajevo's museums.

Barry, a peacetime gun collector and a wartime gunmaker, pointed to a 1938 anti-cannon machine gun. "With enough of these, we can run those Serb bastards out of Sarajevo."



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The floors are littered with World War I and II machine guns waiting to be put back into service. Along the walls are racks of 19th- and even 18th-century rifles plundered with government approval from Sarajevo's museums. Others were donated from private collections.

The gun barrels are bored out to accommodate modern ammunition, and those beyond repair are cut up and welded into weird new weapons.

"It's all improvisation," said Jacques, an electrician who is one of the shop's workers. "But we have no weapons. Anything we can use for defense we use because we have no choice."

## **In Sarajevo, people getting by – barely**

*Thousands without power splice into electrical lines and tap underground gas lines for heat*

Todd Bensman  
Times Correspondent  
The St. Petersburg Times  
February 10, 1993

SARAJEVO, Bosnia-Herzegovina – As they endure their 10<sup>th</sup> month under siege, this battered city's 300,000 residents are fending off winter's deadly onslaught with a combination of ingenuity, foreign aid and luck.

Fears that freezing weather would add thousands of hypothermia and starvation victims to Sarajevo's already long roster of war dead have receded for the moment. People are improvising ways to stay warm, and a determined United Nations relief mission is delivering adequate supplies of food, wood and medicine with minor interruptions.

But while daily life has become somewhat more bearable, U.N. and humanitarian aid officials warn that Sarajevo is not yet over the hump.

"I think we've reached the beginning of February in much better shape than we had feared, but that doesn't mean people aren't losing weight or are

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eating three meals a day,” said Tony Land, the director in Sarajevo for the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. “There’s still a dangerous period until the middle of March. I’m not relaxing until we’re through it.”



*Citizens of Sarajevo making do with resourceful methods of survival. December 1992.  
Photo by Todd Bensman*

Numbing winter conditions came later than usual but hit the city hard in December and early January.

The relentless pounding of Serb guns from the surrounding hills had long ago knocked out windows, electricity, water, and natural gas, leaving most people exposed to the elements. Sniper fire halted for nearly four weeks the U.N. airlift carrying about half the city’s humanitarian food needs. Few residents escaped the agony of those days, as they braved shellfire to forage for dwindling sources of food, water and especially wood in temperatures that stayed in the teens. Ten elderly residents who lived near the front lines died of hyperthermia.



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The Serb guns continue to kill and maim – 77 dead and 393 wounded last week alone. But the city crews working under fire with few spare parts have managed to rig electricity from one remaining line – at least intermittently – to about 35 percent of the population, city and U.N. engineers said. Water has been restored – again intermittently – to about 20 percent of residential households. That means fewer people must expose themselves to shelling while they wait outside in lines to fill up plastic jugs.



*Freshly dug Muslim graves in Bosnia 1993*

“We are now satisfied with the little things,” said Hedija Starholdjic, a 32-year-old refugee woman living in the crowded quarters of a camp in Sarajevo. “Things have improved, but we have no money, and we want to go home.”

Thousands still without electricity are splicing into electrical wires and tapping underground gas lines to heat their homes. A month ago, people were wondering the streets with axes and saws in a desperate search for

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wood to heat their homes. Now, many wander around clutching metal tubing in search of appropriate fittings and regulators.

“It’s not legal, but in this situation it is legal to survive,” Sarajevo Mayor Muhamed Kresevljakovic said. For the moment. “Things are better. We are doing everything we can to repair our utilities. But everything we do, the aggressors destroy.”

United Nations engineers have been trying to repair two additional power lines into the city but are often forced to withdraw because of shooting.

“If the rounds are close, and we are targeted, we stop,” said Maj. Michel Maufrais, the U.N.’s Sarajevo sector engineer. “We are still trying to negotiate a cease-fire.”



*Sarajevo residents wander the shell-shocked city in a desperate hunt for firewood to avoid hypothermia. Photo by Todd Bensman*

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Doctors at the frequently shelled Kosevo hospital complex also report improvements in recent weeks, due to more regular supplies of medicine, equipment and electricity.

“We have succeeded in saving many, many lives, about 20 to 30 percent more,” said Naim Kadic, chief of the hospital’s clinical center. “But last week, the (Serbs) tried again to ruin everything they wanted. They hit rooms, killed patients and killed another doctor. We always repair the holes and go on. We tremble with fear for the moment the electricity goes out.”

Food supplies were basic but adequate earlier this week. U.N. officials say they are delivering close to 280 tons per day the city needs, and military police have successfully cracked down on the pilfering of humanitarian food for the black market.

In at least one sign that life is easing, wealthier Sarajevans lined up recently in a food store for beef from a freshly slaughtered cow brought in from a hillside home. One pound of meat costs the equivalent of \$30, about twice the average monthly wage.

People waiting in line at hundreds of distribution outlets for their 10-day U.N. allotment find plenty to complain about.

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*An elderly Sarajevo resident searches for cigarette butts in December 1992. Photo by Todd Bensman*

“I’m 70 years old and look what I get,” said Rasim Mehanovic, emerging from a distribution center with only a small bag of flour and box of cheese.

Their basic needs met, Sarajevans are making some effort to normalize their lives. New cafes and bars are springing up. A theater group puts on a weekly performance of Hair. Some city buses are even running. Streets are being swept, while months of accumulated garbage is being burned. Two weeks ago, a beer factory began producing a metallic tasting version of Saraevesko Beer for the first time since the war broke out.

But Serb gunners remain a sobering peril. Nine people died last week in a mortar blast as they lined up for water outside the beer factory.

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## In Sarajevo, safe areas 'just something for world's conscience'

June 20, 1993

TODD BENSMAN

The St. Petersburg Times

SARAJEVO, Bosnia-Herzegovina

Divining the meaning of words is poetry professor Mensura Eatovic's passion and vocation. But in Sarajevo these days, the two words on everybody's lips - "safe haven" - are oxymoronic to intellectuals like her and simply meaningless to virtually everyone else.

"Safe haven? Sarajevo is neither safe nor a haven," said Eatovic, breathing hard after running through one of the city's most dangerous sniper alleys on her way to the University of Sarajevo. "We are still being murdered like animals at the same rate."



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*The absence of power and heat left Sarajevans to chop down park trees for firewood to heat homes and cook during the winter of 1992-93. Photo by Todd Bensman*

The U.N. Security Council declared Sarajevo one of six safe zones in Bosnia earlier this month. With its 300,000 residents surrounded and bombarded by Serbian forces for 14 months, Sarajevo is by far the largest of the zones. But no one here feels any safer from the Serbian bombs and snipers that continue to kill and maim. Sarajevans feel forgotten. And U.N. field officers, while struggling to maintain a mantle of credibility around the safe haven gesture, concede that actual enforcement is a long way off.

"This is just something for the world's conscience," said Ziba Kominlia, a 21-year-old Muslim woman, reflecting the opinion of many people interviewed last week. "Now, more than ever, I feel deadly scared. I'm really afraid that no one will help us and no one will leave this war alive."

The safe haven concept in Bosnia was modeled after the exclusion zones declared in 1991 in southern and northern Iraq to protect that country's ethnic minorities from government attacks after the Persian Gulf war. The idea was for the Western allies to provide a blanket of security over minority-inhabited areas in Iraq using the threat of air strikes.

The concept was invoked in the Bosnian war as a stopgap measure to save Muslims in six besieged cities from an aggressive military campaign by Serbian forces to expel them through occupation, bombardment and starvation. The Security Council declared the cities - Sarajevo, Tuzla, Zepa, Gorazde, Srebrenica and Bihac - safe havens only after Western and NATO allies retreated in bitter disagreement over how to use force to stop the Serbian campaign.

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*The randomness of artillery strikes throughout the city were in evidence in late 1992.  
Photo by Todd Bensman*

Now the allies are wrangling just as inconclusively over how to impose the safe havens. In the meantime, the guns over Sarajevo continue to terrorize the population with random shelling and incessant sniper fire.

"A lot of people believed the West would never leave Sarajevo, but now Sarajevo citizens are preparing for another long, hard winter," said Sead Demirovic, editor of the Evening News. "People have lost hope. They are preparing for the long haul."

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*Children race across streets exposed to sniper fire in Sarajevo. Photo by Todd Bentsman*

U.N. officials said Sarajevo remains a dangerous place because the military situation in and around the city is so complex. An additional battalion of 2,000 soldiers with offensive capabilities is needed to implement even the most minor details of the plan. And no Western nation has yet volunteered the troops. By comparison, Srebrenica, the first and only eastern Bosnian enclave to actually take rudimentary shape as a safe haven, required about 240 Canadian U.N. soldiers.

The Sarajevo plan calls for recalcitrant Serb forces to withdraw, along with their heavy weapons, beyond a 20-mile buffer zone and for Bosnian defenders to relinquish their weapons. Protected access corridors would be established to open up the city.

The sheer size of this safe zone would require a joint Bosnian-Serb commission just to begin hammering out boundaries and a myriad of



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other disputes before the haven could form. Creating such a commission could take months because none of the parties seem to like the haven plan. "It has been declared a safe area but is not an established safe area," said Cmdr. Barry Frewer, a spokesman for U.N. peacekeepers. "We don't have the practical conditions on the ground to implement it. It requires a lot of cooperation by both sides, and politically we've seen concerns raised by both sides."

Bosnia's Muslim-dominated government has rejected the safe haven on the grounds that Sarajevo would become a permanent ghetto of ragged refugees, cementing the Serb policy of "ethnic cleansing." The Serbs, in turn, are in no mood to ease off their offensive mode and might require some military nudging to cooperate.

Despite the stalemates, some Sarajevans have clasped onto the haven plan as their only hope.

Boskovic Radojka, a 60-year-old Serb, ignored several mortar explosions nearby as she waited in a bread line. She said, "We trust the U.N. and hope they protect us, but now we have no protection. I am still an optimist. It's better to live in hope. I have to take care of my spirit; otherwise I will go mad."

## **A little known American operation in Bosnia: 14 U.S. troops quietly brave Sarajevo battles**

December 1992

By Todd Bensman

The St. Petersburg Times

Kiseljak, Bosnia-Herzegovina - About 20 miles east of this pretty Muslim town, U.S. Army Maj. Clark DuCharme got a taste of what he missed when a back injury forced him to sit out the Persian Gulf war.

The Tampa Bay area resident was leaving a Sarajevo bunker with several other members of the United Nations Protection Force recently when a half-dozen bullets slammed into a nearby wall.

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"The bullets sort of ricocheted around, and we all hit the ground. Then we ran hunched down over to the (armored personnel carrier) and drove off," DuCharme said. "I was a bit worried at the time."

U.S. policy limits direct involvement of American forces in Bosnia-Herzegovina to pilots ferrying humanitarian aid into the besieged capital, Sarajevo. But DuCharme is one of 14 exceptions to that rule whose orders were personally reviewed and signed by Gen. Colin Powell, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, and Defense Secretary Dick Cheney.

In a little-publicized operation, these American servicemen were quietly ordered to the sprawling U.N. headquarters in Kiseljak several weeks ago to assist the U.N.'s massive winter humanitarian relief operation. Most of the Americans will work here in various administrative capacities under the U.N. banner for the next four months.

But from Kiseljak, a relatively safe haven controlled by Croatian and Muslim forces, the Americans frequently make trips aboard U.N. armored vehicles into the free-fire zone of Sarajevo. They carry 9mm sidearms and wear flak jackets and helmets to protect against the indiscriminate Serbian artillery, mortar shells and bullets that rain down from the surrounding hills.

"There was a lot of teasing when we first got here that if one of us were to be killed then we'd suddenly be reclassified as British," said DuCharme, 38, who helped plan the network of medical facilities to support British, Spanish, French and Danish peacekeeping troops.

The Americans were ordered to Bosnia from their NATO headquarters in Germany. Most are family men in their late 30s and early 40s.

U.S. Army Lt. Col. Richard Liebe of Tacoma, Wash., said the decision to involve American servicemen in the relief operation arose from a desire "at the highest levels" to maintain contact with U.S. contributions of technology and material.

"Don't forget, Americans are involved in the supply loop," Liebe said. "And also the U.N. guys realized, 'Hey, the Americans have some pretty neat stuff. Let's get them in here.' We had to get a name by name approval

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because there was a policy decision not to have a troop commitment. So believe me, it raised a few eyebrows to see the American flag around here."

Until Sarajevo, Liebe, a 45-year-old father of four, had not seen combat since his two tours of duty in Vietnam in the late 1960s. Liebe said he has had no close calls during his three trips to Sarajevo, although one shell landed about 150 yards away, "and you always hear shooting and shelling in the distance."

"There's a whole lot of difference between this and Vietnam," Liebe said, "because back then I was a grunt getting shot at personally. And here, it's random."

Kiseljak, a medieval town of elegant Ottoman architecture dotted with slender white minarets, is the administration nerve center for aid convoys traveling from coastal ports in Croatia to Sarajevo. The United Nations has commandeered the town's largest hotel - the Dalmatian - for its headquarters and turned it into an armed camp, complete with razor wire. The Americans spend most of their time there.

The British tanks and armored personnel carriers that escort trucks carrying food and medicine into Sarajevo are based outside town. In the hotel, servicemen from a half-dozen countries manage the massive operation. They sleep six and seven to a room and eat meals together in the dining room. Weapons and ammunition are stacked in the lobby.

Kiseljak was about the last place Air Force Master Sgt. Don Mitchell expected to be sent. The 37-year-old native of Punxsutawney, Pa., is a portly, mild-mannered office manager who seems more at home with a computer than a flak jacket. He has rarely ventured outside the U.N. compound and said he'd rather not have been sent to Kiseljak to organize an administrative office.

For DuCharme, who grew up and lives in Dover in Hillsborough County, it was a different story. He was bitterly disappointed at missing the gulf war and "wanted to get something like this on my record. I talked to my wife about it and my commanding officer. My wife said `You'd be crazy not to do it.' "

What about the danger?

# The Siege of Sarajevo

"I knew I was going to Bosnia-Herzegovina. We'd been briefed beforehand, and I knew there would be shelling and sniper fire. . . . I don't mean to sound heroic or anything, but when I get to Sarajevo, I'm not scared. My awareness is up; my adrenaline may be pumped up but not to the point of being scared."

DuCharme's position has been unexpectedly cut, and he will return to the 7th Medical Command headquarters in Germany soon.

"There's a part of me that wants to get home, but I'm going to miss these men," he said. "I've done everything I've been ordered to do. I've accomplished the mission."