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Last week saw what there was of international policy in on Kosovo go up in flames.

With more than 100 houses razed, dozens of churches destroyed, nearly 30 dead, more than 600 civilians injured, UN facilities severely damaged and Nato being forced to evacuate the minorities it could not protect, the political as well as physical damage has been enormous.

What went up in flames were large parts of the international efforts since 1998 to achieve a stable compromise over the future of Kosovo.

It was early in Rambouillet that an ambitious effort at a settlement was done. But it failed, and instead of peace we got a war that ended with peace being even more distant.

Humanitarian concerns were in focus back then. During the 78 days of the air campaign and the ethnic carnage on the ground, nearly 1m Albanians were forced to flee to other countries.

The immediate success of the United Nations and Nato was the rapid return of those Albanians. But this coincided with the failure to prevent up to 250,000 people, primarily Serbs, being forced or choosing to flee.

The Kosovo war drew broad public support as it was seen as an attempt to stop ethnic cleansing and promote the long-term vision of a multi-ethnic

Balkans.

Since then, the difficult task given to the UN interim administration has been to build up multi-ethnic institutions and to try to make it possible for those who fled to return.

The core issue of the conflict – disintegration through a new state or integration in some sort of common framework – has, however, not been addressed. As long as the core issue was left open, expectations of a final settlement for one side merely fuelled the fears of the other.

There has been some progress. The small number of remaining minorities participated in the 2001 elections and broad-based provisional institutions were set up. There was hope that some minorities who fled would return.

The policy loudly proclaimed by the international community was "standards before status". Only when a decent, multi-ethnic Kosovo had been built could the question of its future status be addressed. Recently, mid-2005 was set as the date to begin an assessment of progress on the standards. Then came Kosovo's Black Wednesday and everything changed.

The explosive violence in Mitrovica was one thing. But as attacks against Serbs, the UN and even Nato were unleashed throughout the province, the entire policy of managing the region crashed down. There can be no question that it was a deliberate attempt to drive away as many Serbs as possible, to attack the UN as much as possible and to test how far one could drive Nato into accepting the new realities.

We will learn over time to what extent the offensive was pre-planned and by whom. The political objective was abundantly clear in the choice of targets. This was a campaign of ethnic cleansing.

Kosovo changed dramatically. And the rage risks spreading across the region. Mosques were burning in Belgrade and Nis, and a church was set on

fire in Bosnia.

Instead of the mantra of "standards before status" we must now urgently choose between either a policy of status or a policy of standards. In the US, some are now saying that a multi-ethnic Kosovo is not realistic and that in the wake of the violence we should reward the perpetrators with immediate independence: status without standards.

But giving in to violence today would give a powerful incentive to the ethnic cleansers of tomorrow. It is a principle as dangerous in the fight against ethnic violence as it is in the fight against terrorism. It risks betraying everything we have stood and fought for in the region for more than a decade.

Reasserting a demand for standards means reasserting the authority of the international community. This will entail a resolute approach in Kosovo itself. It is imperative that both the possible organisers and the obvious perpetrators of the violence are swiftly brought to justice. Otherwise, we might as well just sit back and wait for the next wave of attacks.

There must also be a pledge by the Kosovo authorities to rebuild the damaged houses and destroyed churches out of their own budget. There is no standard more basic than this that should be demanded of Kosovo's institutions.

At the same time, we must contemplate a tougher approach to some fundamental issues. We should tolerate the division of Mitrovica no less than we have tolerated the division of Mostar. On the fundamental status issue, we should clearly state that, with the exception of changes of borders, any solution agreed between Pristina and Belgrade is acceptable to the international community. Any solution that does not have such agreement is unacceptable.

In many respects, Kosovo looks like a Palestine in Europe. More than 70

per cent of the population is below the age of 30, unemployment is above 50 per cent, the economy is moribund, even emigration has become more difficult.

If these issues are not addressed properly, we risk setting up a state destined for failure. It is high time we wake up to the realities of Kosovo not in order to accept betrayal of our principles, but in order to assert them.[]

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