

## Why Don't They Just Shake Hands, Kiss and Make Up?

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### **Sažetak**

Više od 11 godina sam radio na Balkanu, od toga najduže u Bosni i Hercegovini. Bio sam svjedok nekih strašnih događaja što su se tu desili, događaja koji su ostavili ožiljke tako duboke da dotiču samo dno ljudske duše. Ja vjerujem da process oporavka i pomirenja mora započeti od najnižih nivoa. Javno mnijenje u balkanskim zemljama mora biti informirano o svakom koraku i, još važnije, ono mora vjerovati u taj process. Ukoliko se zločini prošlosti ne budu objelodanili i pravda zadovoljena, to će biti ozbiljna prepreka za pomirenje u budućnosti.

U procesu oporavka i pomirenja neophodno je koristiti modele koji su bili uspješni i nadgrađivati ih. Gdje postoji opće nepovjerenje prema političarima treba koristiti utjecaj onih kojima se vjeruje, i to kojima se vjeruje kod svih strana, kako bi bilo moguće raditi sa političarima. Što god da se uradi mora biti urađeno sa razumijevanjem i dostajanstveno. Narodima Balkana treba pokazati poštovanje koje zaslužuju, te im ukazati na nađu za svjetliju budućnost uz znanje i poštovanje o onome kroz šta su prošli.

### **Abstract**

I have worked in the Balkans for over eleven years, most of it in Bosnia and Herzegovina. I witnessed some of the terrible things that occurred, and the scars left by the wars of the last decade go deep to the very soul of the people.

The healing process must, I believe, start from the ground level. The general public of the Balkan countries must be kept informed and involved every step of the way and they must believe in the process. If the crimes of the past are not faced, if justice is not handed out to the guilty, it will be a bar to reconciliation.

Use the models that are successful and build on them. Where there is a general mistrust of politicians, try to use the influence of those who may be trusted – and trusted by all sides – to work with the politicians.

Whatever is done must be done with understanding, with sympathy and with dignity. Give the people of the Balkans the respect they deserve. Give them hope for a brighter future but do it in a way that understands and respects what they have been through.

**I**n this paper, I am going to talk mainly about my time spent in the Balkans over an extensive period. I will look at it from a grassroots level – that is, how deeply the events of the last decade of the twentieth century affected the people of the communities and countries concerned.

I would like to start by suggesting that before we look to the solutions we need to look very carefully at the problems! It is very easy to say, ‘Why don’t they shake hands, kiss and make up?’, as though it were a trivial dispute between a couple of long-time neighbours. However, the scars across the Balkans go deep to the very soul of the people.

I arrived in the Balkans for the first time in October 1992, and since then have spent over eleven years here – most of it in Bosnia and Herzegovina. My first base was Kastella, near Split airport, and my mandate, for the small British charity Feed the Children, was to deliver aid donated by the people of the UK to refugees from BiH and internally displaced people from other parts of Croatia, who were then living along the coastal strip either side of Split.

A few weeks later, I went to central Bosnia to the town of Vitez, because the first British Regiment to be based in BiH, ‘The Cheshires,’ – with their charismatic leader Colonel Bob Stewart – had its HQ there.

I would like to paint a picture in your mind of some of the images that are stored in my memory from various stages and different places across the Balkans since the end of 1992:

- A beautiful little girl of about ten years old with a face like an angel, lying in a bed in a makeshift hospital. Sadly, she will have to spend the rest of her life with a false right hand. She would be in her early 20s now.
- In the same hospital, in a side room, are two beds. Lying on one is a baby girl of two or three, with her left leg amputated several inches above where her knee should have been. Her brother lies on the adjoining bed, spread-eagled with his wrists and ankles tied to the bed posts so that he can’t reach the bandages covering the injuries to his stomach and abdomen. Their mother and other siblings sit beside them, bewildered.
- The haunting eyes of an emaciated baby of eighteen months – though she is so tiny she looks about half that age, only her alert eyes give her true age away. She would have died had she not been brought to the hospital and given the gluten-free diet she desperately needed. But, because of the danger of shelling, her ward – and that of the other babies and young children – was in the hospital basement, among the water pipes, drains and cables.

- A woman in her mid-forties, distraught, seeking information about her son. He was a very young soldier undergoing training, and she knew he was captured and registered as prisoner of war. He has not been seen since.
- A group of four old ladies in their seventies and eighties, dressed in black and sitting on a bench in a collective centre. I could sense that they were wondering just where they were, why they were there and what was to happen to them. Their plight was made worse by being several hundred kilometres from the homes where they had spent most, if not all, of their lives. I couldn't help thinking that, if things were different, perhaps one of them could have been my mother.
- Walking through a lightly wooded area and, in a clearing, being shown a hole in the ground, roughly circular and some five metres in diameter. The hole was the opening to an underground cavern. It was twenty metres to the base of a ladder that had been placed by those whose task was to recover the bodies that lay below hundreds of tons of rocks and animal bones. I believe eighty or more bodies were eventually recovered from that pit. They had been forced to stand on the edge of the entrance hole and then been summarily executed. One man, with his hands tied behind his back, realised what was going to happen to him ran for his life. Just as soldiers fired at him he tripped and fell. He heard someone say, 'We got him', but they hadn't. He was later able to lead investigators and others to the location.

In the cave below, it was evident that one man had not been killed either by the bullet that shattered one arm above the elbow, or by the grenades that had been thrown into the pit to 'finish off' anyone not already dead. This could be seen by 'new' marks on the cave walls and ceiling, which had otherwise remained untouched for countless centuries.

This desperate individual had shuffled, with his hands and legs bound, to a ledge, where he either bled to death from the awful wound in his upper arm or died from thirst and hunger. There was no way out for him: the hole in the ground through which he fell after being shot was the only exit. Even if he had not been injured, without a ladder or rope there could have been no escape.

- A group of families refusing to hear talk of recovery of bodies or to give blood samples so that DNA could identify recovered remains. Pointing an accusing finger, they were saying, 'You, Mr International Community person, you were here to protect us. Our missing relatives were alive when you got here. They are now being held in mobile prison camps or have been taken to prisons across the border. You find them!'
- A group of mass graves where hundreds of bodies were recovered, many partially burned. They had been removed from their original gravesite and transported hundreds of kilometres to the secondary site. When word of this reached family members, there were looks of hopelessness in their eyes; just wondering if these graves held the bodies of their missing loved ones.
- A young mother, who had given birth in a tent, sitting on the floor of a chicken shed. She was about twenty, and her baby was a few days old. She

shared her accommodation with about 700 others, her only privacy a blanket hanging on string, separating her from the occupants of the adjoining floor space. What a start to motherhood; what a start to a new life!

- A young woman—still a good friend and now living with her Irish husband and baby son in Canada—who, along with her colleagues in UNHCR, had done much to assist Feed the Children to get desperately needed baby food and other aid into an enclave. She herself became a frightened and traumatised refugee. It was some years later that I learned her father was ‘missing’, and some time after that his body had been recovered and identified by DNA.

I could go on but won’t. There are countless thousands of such stories and scenes of murder, tragedy and utter sadness, followed by anger and disbelief that this could happen in the last decade of the twentieth century while the world looked on.

So who were the people in those respective scenes I have just mentioned?

I don’t think it would do any good to recount which nationality, ethnicity or religion the people were. Suffice to say they were all people of the Balkans: some were from Croatia, some from Bosnia and Herzegovina, some from Serb and Montenegro including Kosovo. There were Catholics, Orthodox and Muslims; one was a Roma family caught up in the fighting in middle-BiH.

What I hope these glimpses have done is to emphasise how that terrible series of wars affected ordinary people, most of them civilians. All of those people have or had families, they had friends, they had colleagues.

Word of the horrors that befell people spread by word of mouth as well as through the media. Many stories in the media were heavily loaded with propaganda but sadly all too many of the dreadful events portrayed were true. Some people witnessed events for themselves; others, such as those recovering bodies, witnessed the aftermath and can only wonder what terrors those people faced before and as they died.

Yet we encourage them to put it all behind them almost immediately. Can we really expect that to happen? Only recently we saw what will hopefully be the end of death and destruction in Northern Ireland—that lasted over thirty years! How long did it take many countries to put the events of the Second World War behind them? This week sees the sixtieth anniversary of the end of the Second World War in the Far East and Pacific, yet many can still not forgive and they will never forget. We expect neighbour who fought against neighbour—and, in many cases, who had family members killed by a neighbour—to forgive and forget the horrors and begin again, as if nothing had happened.

From what I have been told, I believe it is true to say that during the war in BiH, there was a higher percentage of civilian casualties compared to military losses than in any other war in history. That may not be the case after Rwanda, but that came later. When soldiers die in battle, families and friends mourn. When civilians, families and in some cases communities are killed because of their nationality, ethnicity or religion, communities and countries mourn and want justice and revenge.

I believe the healing process must start from the ground level. The general public of the Balkan countries must be kept informed and involved every step of the way, and they must believe in the process. There is still massive mistrust of politicians – national and international. I am not sure that enough questions have been asked of the general public to see what they want, to hear their concerns, to hear their fears, to hear their thoughts for their future. We hear of a lot of talking to and by politicians – what about the ordinary people?

During and after the war, propaganda was used, to varying degrees, by all sides, and was accepted as being fact by all sides. Reports and TV footage of events shown in different areas, with a spin put on them depicting the victim and aggressor to fit the audience, were not uncommon. Desperate people needed hope, and they turned to their leaders to give them hope. But too many false hopes and falsehoods were given and sadly, all too often, they just fed the party line to the listening public. Little wonder the people of the Balkans feel as they do.

But I believe there is hope.

There can be no people more desperate than the families still looking for, and waiting for news of, missing relatives and close friends. Yet the Family Associations, set up across the region in national, ethnic or religious groups during or after the conflict, now work together. When I started to work with the International Commission on Missing Persons (ICMP) in August 2000, I went to meetings where representatives of more than one nationality, ethnicity or religion were present. The atmosphere was highly charged, with insults regularly exchanged across tables. Over the passage of time, with guidance and encouragement from dedicated people, there came a realisation and acceptance that they all have the same problem and they can now see progress and a way ahead – albeit a slow and painful process. The model used by ICMP could, I suggest, be a blueprint to be used by those seeking to promote reconciliation.

For the general public to ‘buy into’ a process they must be a part of that process. Applaud the successes and give encouragement to those who doubt. These are damaged people – some damaged by a former neighbour, some damaged by an opposing army and some by their own politicians.

Last year, the Republika Srpska Commission – looking into the events in and around Srebrenica in July 1995 – showed that there are brave people who will stand up to the hurtful truth of what happened. There are people who, despite the preaching of nationalist politicians, will stand up for what they believe is right. Those who are brave enough to stand up and be counted are indeed few, and it must be remembered that the ballot boxes have not been kind to moderates who want reconciliation.

More must be done by local governments to exorcise the sins of those who committed grievous crimes in the past – and *all* sides must do it. I am sure the international community will do all they can in the remaining time that they are present to support moderate politicians, law and order, and the judicial systems. I have spoken to enough people in my time here to firmly believe that people want a decent future – the future that was cruelly taken from them.

As institutions of reconstruction, as I said earlier, I recommend the ICMP model and the progress that has been made by the Associations of the Missing to ensure that their rights are recognised and their missing relatives are not simply forgotten. BiH is the first country in the world to have a 'Law on the Missing', and a Missing Persons Institute, officially ratified as a state-level organisation at the end of August 2005. Making the search for those still missing following the conflicts in BiH is a human rights issue, not one based on the nationality, ethnicity or religion of the victim.

I also commend the work being carried out by local NGOs and other organisations, especially those working across national, ethnic and religious divides on civil society, conflict resolution and human rights issues. These people are open-minded and honest. They can see that all sides have the same problems and are going through the same emotions, but they can work together with a common goal. These organisations, if given financial and political support from national and international bodies, can reach across the Balkan region to all people, because those I have just described are the people.

Reconciliation won't just happen, and it cannot happen without mechanisms in place leading to progress in other areas. There must be an effective government in place that has the trust of all the people, not just the majority of people from one nationality, ethnicity or religion who support 'their' representative. More needs to be done to assist moderate politicians.

The public must trust in the economy, but before they can trust in an economy they must see economic growth and the end of corruption. All too often it is a case of if you have money you can get anything and get away with anything! To move forward with reconciliation, there must not be a desire to return to war. If the economy is buoyant, there is no economic reason to go to war again.

The international community will not be in the region forever. OHR, which has taken the political lead in BiH, will leave, as will OSCE, the UN GROUP of organisations and the international NGOs. The numbers of UNPROFOR, IFOR and SFOR will be reduced over the years, as will the EUFOR and NATO forces.

BiH must stand on its own. There must be effective and trusted local government. There must be law and order enforced by a solid and united police force. Criminals do not deserve protection because their victim may have been someone from 'the other side' or because of corrupt actions that virtually guarantee literally getting away with murder. Hand-in-glove with law and order go courts of justice – true justice for all – that must include in their mandate war crimes and the arrest of those indicted for war crimes. If the crimes of the past are not faced, if justice is not handed out to the guilty, it will be a bar to reconciliation.

The international and national NGOs still have a big part to play. From providing emergency aid during the war: keeping people alive – they moved to rehabilitation aid after the war – rebuilding houses, schools, utilities, starting income generation schemes and civil society initiatives and so on. NGOs operating across the region have worked on regional co-operation and consultation to promote reconciliation, and that must continue.

Thankfully, there has not been a return to fighting and there has not been widespread terrorism. There has been an uneasy peace and a return to some sort of normality; but for so many it is nothing like what they had. It is, however, difficult to preach reconciliation to a person who is still living in a collective centre ten years after the war ended. A not-insignificant percentage of people who lived in Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Kosovo in 1991 do not live in the same house, town or village now.

I think most people would agree with a point I made earlier about a lack of trust in politicians by the general public; therefore I would like to suggest another approach: using people more likely to be trusted who could, therefore, be the medium to help the government spread the word of reconciliation.

In a very different context, much earlier in my life, I found sport to be a great leveller. Almost thirty years ago, I was a Detective Sergeant in a Police Force in north-east England and I went on secondment to work with the Independent Commission Against Corruption (ICAC) in Hong Kong. The staff members who worked for ICAC were not generally liked because too many people had friends and colleagues who had been imprisoned or had fled the then-British Colony fearing arrest because they had acted corruptly.

In those days I was quite a good cricketer – that crazy game played mainly in countries of the former British Empire that people hold to ridicule because it can be played for five days and nobody wins! I played cricket for Hong Kong and was accepted first of all as a good cricketer. People then got to know me as a person, and by the time they found out I worked for ICAC they had made a judgement call on me as a cricketer and a person. It broke down barriers and I believe helped many people to see ICAC in a different light.

For the last five months, I have worked on tsunami relief for an American NGO, International Relief and Development, in Sri Lanka, where there is still an uneasy peace following the civil war with the Tamil Tigers in the north and east of the country stretching back twenty years. One of their most famous cricketers, Muttiah Muralitharan, is a Tamil, yet he is a national hero.

I want to suggest something for consideration for BiH and indeed the region. I am not saying it will be easy, I don't know if it will work but I do know that anything that may work is worthy of consideration. I am thinking first of all of the sporting icons in this part of the world – from football, handball and basketball (that are played everywhere to a good international standard), to (less universally) tennis and skiing. Then there are the stars of music (pop, folk and classical), and the stars of stage and screen. These people are admired and respected for their skill in whichever discipline they shine. Many of them will also have that respect and admiration from people of different nationality, ethnicity or religion.

Why not try to harness this admiration and respect, to find moderates among them and, working with the Government – as to succeed it must come from the Government – use them to advocate for and help spread the word of the benefits of reconciliation to combat the negative words of nationalists and bigots. Certainly in the UK there is a clamour to use people with celebrity status to advertise products; why not use them to promote reconciliation?

When I went to school in England, all too many years ago, we were taught the 'Three Rs: reading, 'riting and 'rithmetic. For those who are working on reconciliation, I would like to suggest the 'Four Hs' – three of them to be used at all times and one to be avoided at all times. To remember, and use on a daily basis: *honesty*, *humility* and *humanity*. To avoid at all times: *hostility*.

I would like to draw another analogy from my time as a police officer: to when I was taught to drive fast safely, with a view to becoming a traffic cop. I was taught to glance in the rear view mirror every five seconds but to pay most of my attention to what lay ahead. The best advice of all was to look as far ahead as possible, to be able to take early action for any eventuality. We must be aware of the past, but let us spend more time and energy looking ahead.

The terrible series of wars have had a devastating effect on people from all parts of the Balkans, especially those who were directly affected by the fighting and those who lost family members, homes and livelihoods. Those scars run very deep.

Although much has been done, and is being done, the general public must be allowed and encouraged to play a greater part in building its own future. We need to use the models that are proving successful and build on them. Where there is a general mistrust of politicians, try to use the influence of those who may be trusted – and trusted by all sides – to work with the politicians. However, the fabric of any solid society – democratic government, a stable and growing economy, and law and order – must also take place so that reconciliation can flourish.

Dreams, aspirations, livelihoods, homes, family and friends were lost. Yet while those who died cannot be brought back, by working with the people their dreams and aspirations can be reborn, and livelihoods and homes rebuilt.

Whatever is done must be done with understanding, with sympathy and with dignity. Give the people of the Balkans the respect they deserve. Give them hope for a brighter future, but do it in a way that understands and respects what they have been through.