

FRAGILE STATE

ART FROM KOSOVA





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FRAGILE STATE : ART FROM KOSOVA

An initiative of Manchester Aid to Kosovo
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 Project Coordinator – Fazli Blakçori
 Curated by James Walmsley

Pam Dawes and James Walmsley wish to thank all the members of their curatorial team: Fazli Blakçori, Paul Cliff, Mike Anitt, Matt Raw, Bleta Kabashi, Hajdin Hoxha, Bronwen Simpson, Saranda Bogujevci and Agron Blakçori for their ideas, advice, support and commitment over the last two years.

Portraits and landscape photography by Paul Cliff

Artists statements written by Bronwen Simpson,
 Pam Dawes and James Walmsley
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Press Consultant – Julia Brosnan
 Design by A to M

Manchester Aid to Kosovo wishes to thank the following sponsors:

The Arts Council
 Awards for All
 British Airways
 Department of Non-Resident Affairs, Ministry of Culture, Youth and Sport,
 Government of Kosovo
 Cecil and Hilda Lewis Charitable Trust
 Selatin and Safet Bogujevci
 Castle Fine Arts Foundry Ltd
 Digetex www.digetex.com

Thanks also go to Stockport Art Gallery staff including Jo Ward, Bronwen Simpson, Jackie Mellor, Andy Firth and Patrick McComiskey for their vision and support for this challenging project and also to the many additional members of Stockport MBC supporting this project, to Damon Gough (aka Badly Drawn Boy) and David Vassallo (MaK patrons), Jim Jones, the Imperial War Museum North especially Jim Forrester and Debbie Walker and her team, Vernon Mill, University of Manchester (Ana Carden-Coyne), Manchester Metropolitan University (Professor Steve Hawley and staff), Eden Project (especially Sue Hill, Jane Knight, Tim Smit and Deborah Hinton), the BBC especially Paresh Patel, The Guardian especially Ian Traynor, Ben @ A to M, Frankie Mullen, the Walmsley family, Andy Dawes, Maxine Pearson, Wayne Partridge at CART, Cathy Wills and Mrs H. Lewis, Chris Greaves at Astra Signs, Altrincham Baptist Church, Visiting Arts, Kathryn Simonds, Kerenza Hines and Ian Parkin.

In Kosova:

Special thanks to Vizioni i Paqes, Minister Agim Veliu, Minister Haraçija, Bekim Toçani, Naim Dedushaj, Arjeta Emra, Alberta Troni, Nita Qena, the Bogujevci and Durici families, Ismet Neziri, Burhan Blakçori, Anyla Musa, Valbona Mehmeti, Sali Shkupolli @ Arta, Azem Rusinovci, and the Municipality of Podujevë.

Manchester Aid to Kosovo invites creative responses to this exhibition. If you would like to develop a responsive piece of work in any art form, including writing, please contact:

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The 22 acre Manchester Peace Park in Kosova is being created by MaK at the request of Kosovar children medically evacuated to Manchester. In 1999 the children requested the park as a living symbol of love and hope received in the UK. We hope this project honours that aim and that artists in both Kosova and the UK will be inspired to develop the Manchester Peace Park as a centre of artistic excellence and peace.



Curating this exhibition with the support of my friends has felt like striking a tuning fork. In developing this project and bringing these artists together, we have created a sound and a resonance. A cultural vibration. This vibration is a force. An artistic force of integrity, drama and power. It emanates from the artists and their work. It fills us with a sense of urgency for life and for survival. Their work has a raw intensity, sensitivity and honesty which reflects and connects us to the environment in which it was conceived: a recent environment of political instability, brutality, injustice and war. It is an honour for me to present the work of these nine artists to a UK audience for the first time. Their friendship, trust and integrity resonate within me.

James Walmsley, Curator.

ARIAN BERISHA
ISMET JONUZI
ZAKE PRELVUKAJ
ESHREF QAHILI
ADEM RUSINOVCI
AGIM SALIHU
FAHREDIN SPAHIJA
XHEVDET XHAFA
RUDINA XHAFERI

"I am very preoccupied by war. I am not going to stop here. Actually the life itself is war. Struggling, fighting for something better..."

I'm not going to escape from this.

I don't like the war you see. Nobody likes it. You see from my colours, I'm against the war – all the colours are joyful aren't they? This is some kind of message against the war. My intention as an artist is to work for peace.

When I was growing up something inside was trying to explode.

I didn't have any kind of doubt.

I was born a painter.

I know who I am."



1.



2.



ARIAN BERISHA

Images of war, intensity of colour and action.

These epic conflict landscapes bombard the senses with the intensity of their environment.

Although Arian seems to be inspired by destruction, nothing is dead in these paintings. What we see is a continuous battle for life, or the battle of life ... dynamic, aggressive, passionate, always in movement, often confusing, sensual, beautiful and ugly.

- 1. *City on the Landmines*
- 2. *ATAK*
- 3. *Untitled*

3.



"The concept was peace. From weapons I explain my story of the reality of war in Kosova. These are weapons that people fought with. Somebody died from this. Barrels of guns, machine-guns, Kalashnikovs and knives that are made to take lives and destroy them. I have used them. I build sculptures out of them. Through shape, line and volume I have tried to express the drama that we have experienced as a community in this part of the Balkans.

My work represents the wounded soul of my homeland."



1.



2.



ISMET JONUZI

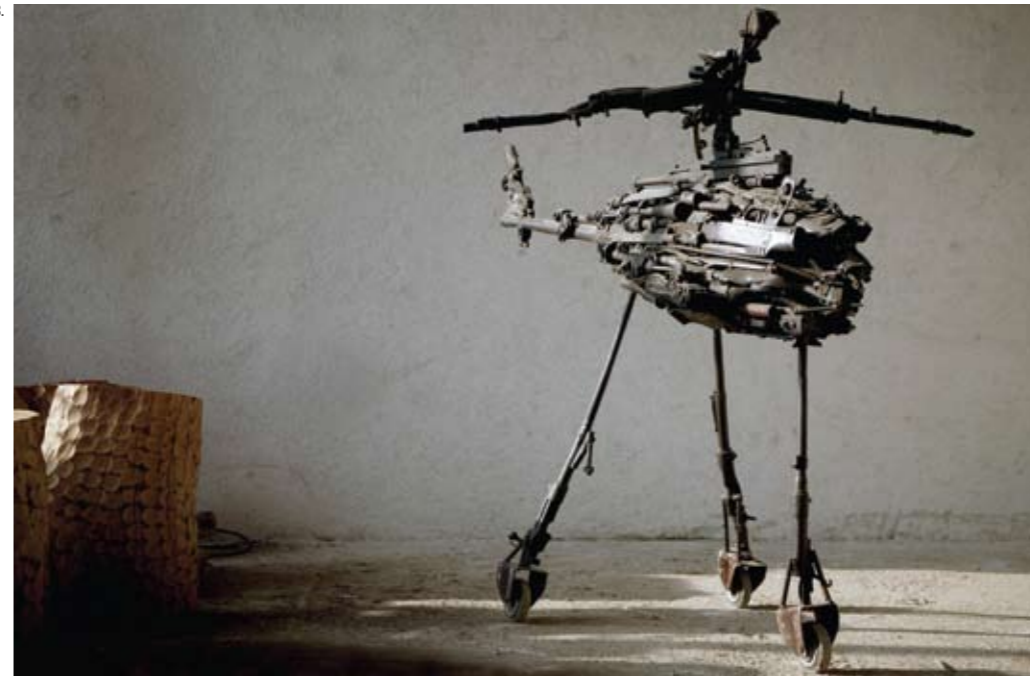
"These weapons have been put beyond use in a way that gives them new life. The sculptures act as a reminder and warning of the destruction caused by conflict as well as providing a beacon of a new life and renewed hope.

The permanence of this new found use for weapons struck me immediately - it is impossible that these guns will ever be used to kill, maim and destroy ever again. What better way to openly demonstrate war is over."

Bronwen Simpson,
Stockport Art Gallery

1. Helicopter Prototype
2. The Helmet
3. The Helicopter

3.



"I am representing myself with several 'Sexhibition' pieces.

The unlimited artistic universe is opened.

Everything is possible.

Sex is the universe itself.

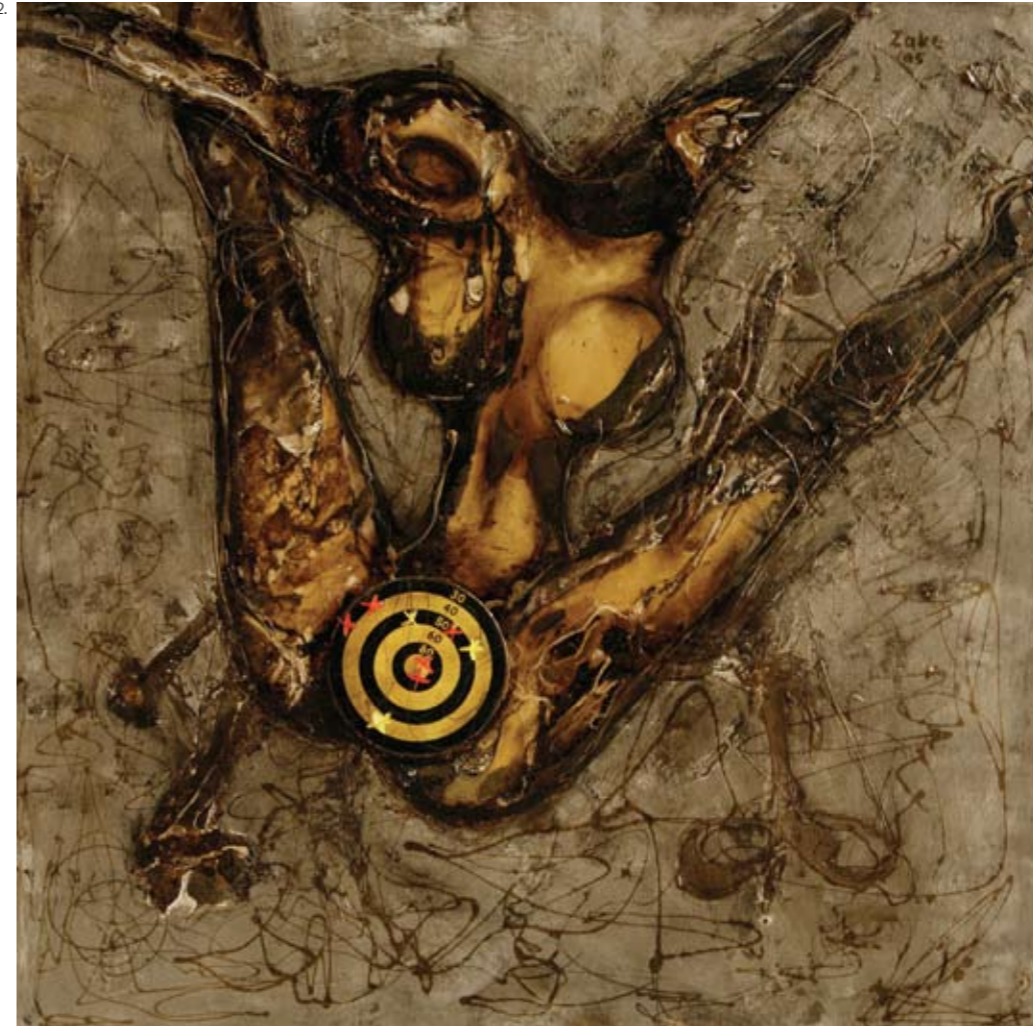
I specifically undertook this challenge in Kosova because of the false representation of our women in the world."



1.



2.



ZAKE PRELVUKAJ

These contorted, screaming figures remind us of images of refugees fleeing their home and country who gave shocking accounts of rape and murder.

A defiled, dignity stripped 'target' screaming silently in anguish.

A removal of all that is sensual and beautiful becomes horrifying and barbaric.

These paintings remind us of Kosova's recent history and current struggles over status.

A country in transition.

A Fragile State.

- 1. *Sexhibition 2*
- 2. *Sexhibition 4*

"My paintings express injustice and danger alongside a deep desire for the peaceful calm of an organised and happy life.

My cycles express my own experience of space and time.

Despite the spiritual disturbance during the last wars in the Balkans, even though the horror of this bloody time is so close and fresh, all that interests me as an artist is the release of people from dark memories in Kosovo. In my paintings I aim for their rebirth. I want to start a new chapter in my message for humanity, and speak to other cultures. Everyone has the opportunity to find and enjoy freedom in the space and blueness of my sky."



1.



2.



3.



ESHREF QAHILI

"The Last March had a huge effect on me. It immediately made me think of all the reasons why large groups of people congregate outside. I didn't know where this particular scene was or why this large crowd of people were gathered - I didn't even know the title of the piece but I instantly thought of old TV footage I've seen in my home town of civil rights marches. I thought of the peace rallies I had been on, about the famine and people taking to the roads in mass numbers, about marching behind the hearse at my Granny's funeral - and then about news footage of large numbers of displaced people in places all over the world who have had to leave their place of birth."

Bronwen Simpson,
Stockport Art Gallery

1. *The Long March*
2. *Still Alive*
3. *From 'Unforgettable Image Cycle'*

"Abandonment of old forms and creation of new forms: limitations of the unlimited present me with a reality. It's a reality which we watch every day as a picture in the big mirror of the world.

It's kind of a mirror from which things have started to free themselves from the confinement of imagery and transform into frightful forms.

I journey through mysterious places that are ahead of us and search and imagine truths yet to come.

This is my reality - a contact that I try to establish with our civilization."



1.



2.



ADEM RUSINOVCI

Mutations and visions; alternative realities and environments where normal rules do not apply.

Adem creates life through the intelligent use of materials. The depth of material knowledge that this artist uses to create his artworks is immediately striking.

The instantly recognisable portions of these figures and landscapes seem to refer to a past life or existence, presented now in a new context.

1. X4
2. X2
3. X3

3.



"I, the artist, am witness. I carry images from the limits of life and of patience."



1.



2.



3.



AGIM SALIHU

Etched on these ancient faces are the marks and the scars that tell part of their long story. Stories of Albanian mythology, ancient traditions and mystical darkness.

Process is very important - the physical act of inscribing into metal - of digging out - of creating the scar lines on the plate that then create the lines on the faces of these ancient figures. This process is integral to the meaning of the work - it simply would not be the same if these marks were applied to paper in any other way.

Ghostly faces appear out of the darkness and act as a constant reminder of what has been before as well highlighting how interpretation of history can change our perception of the past.

1. *Exhausted Bull*

2. *From 'The Accursed Mountains Cycle'*

3. *From 'The Accursed Mountains Cycle'*

"The artist is the independent soul of the people."



1.



2.



3.



FAHREDIN SPAHIJA

These haunting images provoke a howling grief of pain, outrage and injustice. Loss radiates from them. They challenge us to respond. They demand peaceful resolutions that lead away from this barbarity and horror.

Fahredin is witness to this desolation. His images provoke us. Universal laws have been shattered. Lives have been taken.

1. Pain
2. Wintertime
3. Missing 1

"My art is very much to do with Albanian history. I feel I am an Albanian artist. Autobiography is myself and all Albanians.

Everything expressed is real. Everything is deliberate...

I must continue...

Colours, rags; I love them all. With these things I express feelings and concerns related to my heart, head and time.

Inspiration, imagination, courage, psychological burden...

It's me in these paintings."



2.



3.



XHEVDET XHAFA

"Some of the clothing used in many of these huge scale pieces, are very old hand-crafted garments that refer to the strong textile tradition in Kosovar/Albanian tradition. Xhafa provides a new context for these pieces - they have been preserved in his paintings - and have taken on the feel of artefacts that have been unearthed - items that have been suppressed or hidden underground for many years. These works compelled me to look closely, examine, question my own roots, memory and the importance of preservation.

There is something very powerful about using items of clothing and personal possessions in artworks. These objects have an inherent history, a past, and the work tells the story of that past in a way that communicates directly with my body in a very intangible way.

I have never had such a physical response to artwork before. The sheer scale of these artworks also added to the impact. These works confront, envelop, surround and overwhelm and reminded me that you cannot escape your past or deny where you are from."

Bronwen Simpson,
Stockport Art Gallery

1. *Autobiography X11*
2. *Autobiography V11*
3. *Autobiography XX1X*

"While I was studying everybody said, 'Go somewhere abroad, live there, because you can do something more'. But I said, 'NO, I'm going to stay here because I think that this is where I can do my best'. If I go somewhere to live, for example in London, maybe in my subconscious I can steal something from another artist. Here, in Kosova, I am a little isolated but everything is coming from inside.

My artwork mainly deals with the themes that challenge the ethnic Albanians today: confrontations, causes and effects, consequences, weaknesses and strengths."



RUDINA XHAFERI

We have many roles and faces that we have to present to the world, how we define ourselves, using the body as a canvas on the journey to search for the true self - how the world sees us and how we see ourselves.

Rudina's work goes beyond any one art discipline as she works in a truly multi-disciplinary way utilising live art, photography, video, painting and textiles, creating a variety of methods of display.

Rudina is re-defining The Artist as an artform in its own right.

- 1. Looking for my Star
- 2. Rudina 1
- 3. Rudina 3



2007 is a crucial year for Kosovo.

On the 26th March 07 the Secretary General of the United Nations, Ban Ki-moon, wrote to The President of the UN Security Council, fully supporting the recommendations made by his Special Envoy, former Finnish President Martti Ahtisaari, in his report on Kosovo's future status.

His report stated, 'The time has come to resolve Kosovo's status. Upon careful consideration of Kosovo's recent history, the realities of Kosovo today and taking into account the negotiations with the parties, I have come to the conclusion that the only viable option for Kosovo is independence, to be supervised for an initial period by the international community.'

The BBC says the following about Kosovo's recent history: 'The 1974 Yugoslav constitution laid down Kosovo's status as an autonomous province, and pressure for independence mounted in the 1980s after the death of Yugoslav President Tito.

But resentment over Kosovan influence within the Yugoslav federation was harnessed by the future leader, Slobodan Milosevic. On becoming president in 1989 he proceeded to strip Kosovo of its autonomy.

A passive resistance movement in the 1990s failed to secure independence or to restore autonomy, although ethnic Albanian leaders declared unilateral independence in 1991.

In the mid-1990s an ethnic Albanian guerrilla movement, the Kosovo Liberation Army, stepped up its attacks on Serb targets. The attacks precipitated a major, and brutal, Yugoslav military crackdown.

Slobodan Milosevic's rejection of an internationally brokered deal to end the crisis, and the persecution of Kosovo Albanians, led to the start of NATO air strikes against targets in Kosovo and Serbia in March 1999.

Meanwhile, a campaign of ethnic cleansing against Kosovo Albanians was initiated by Serbian forces. Hundreds of thousands of refugees fled to Albania, Macedonia and Montenegro. Thousands of people died in the conflict.

Serbian forces were driven out in the summer of 1999 and the UN took over the administration of the province.' (Profile of Kosovo, BBC ONLINE 17/7/07)

Kosovo has now been administered by the United Nations for 8 years. Martti Ahtisaari states that reintegration into Serbia is not an option.

'For the past eight years, Kosovo and Serbia have been governed in complete separation. The establishment of the United Nations Mission in Kosovo (UNMIK), and its assumption of all legislative, executive and judicial authority throughout Kosovo, has created a situation in which Serbia has not exercised any governing authority over Kosovo. This is a reality one cannot deny; it is irreversible. A return of Serbian rule would not be acceptable to the overwhelming majority of the people of Kosovo. Belgrade could not regain its authority without violent opposition.'

12th April 2007

The Serbian President, Boris Tadic, said that they would do everything they could to avoid an independent Kosovo. "If it is going to become independent, we'll do everything in our power, in terms of diplomacy, political and legal efforts to return Kosovo back to Serbia. I think the Martti Ahtisaari plan is not realistic and not sustainable. I think we have to negotiate about the future status of Kosovo."

20th May 2007

The Observer reported that Russia, an ally of Serbia, had not only rejected the resolution calling for UN endorsement of the Ahtisaari plan, but had warned that it might exercise its veto if there was a vote. Russia, with ethnic, religious and strategic ties to Serbia, said Belgrade's wishes must be respected as a matter of principle.

8th June 2007

The Financial Times reported that Nicolas Sarkozy, President of France, yesterday tried to break the deadlock between Russia and the west over the future of Kosovo by suggesting a "middle way" of postponed independence.

He told fellow leaders at a G-8 summit in Germany that Belgrade and Pristina should be given six months to agree on the province's status, failing which it would automatically become independent.

His compromise, he said, could avert a crisis if Russia vetoed a UN Security Council resolution on Kosovo and the province then unilaterally declared independence.

Such a scenario would divide the international community, put "hundreds of our men" in Nato forces on the ground in Kosovo at risk and could cause a return to violence, President Sarkozy said.

The Kosovo Prime Minister, Agim Ceku, appealed to the UN Security Council members to "adopt a resolution as soon as possible or let us take our own path."

"We can't wait anymore. Every day means an increase in frustration and a loss of legitimacy," said Ceku, who has warned that Kosovo would declare independence unilaterally if thwarted by Russia.

11th June 2007

The Guardian reported that George Bush declared that he had made up his mind that Kosovo should be an independent country, throwing down the gauntlet to Russia and challenging President Vladimir Putin to abandon attempts to block the path to statehood at the UN Security Council.

President George Bush said, "Independence is the goal. That's what the people of Kosovo need to know. If it is apparent that it is not going to happen in a relatively quick period of time, in my judgement, we need to put forward the resolution."

11th July 2007

The Independent in a leading article reported that 'Kosovo's moment of truth is approaching.' The article stated that 'Independence for

Kosovo is clearly justified. There is a strong moral argument in favour. Kosovo's majority Albanian population was treated abominably when under the control of Serbia in the 1990s. And the campaign of ethnic cleansing unleashed in 1999 by the Serbian president Slobodan Milosevic, destroyed Belgrade's legitimacy in the region.'

The UN Secretary General warned that further delay would have disastrous consequences for the Balkans.

12th July 2007

The Herald and Tribune reported that in an effort to unblock the situation, the EU and the United States on July 11th submitted a draft resolution that scraps a provision mandating automatic independence for Kosovo if no voluntary agreement is reached between Kosovo and Serbia. The draft envisages a resumption of talks between the two sides over 120 days with the aim of agreeing to an unspecified status for the province.

20th July 2007

The French ambassador to the UN said that it had been impossible to reach an agreement on a draft resolution in the Security Council.

This was due to Russia vowing to veto the draft resolution that would give Kosovo 'supervised independence' based on the recommendations of Ahtisaari.

Mr de la Sabliere said an agreement on Kosovo would now be pursued through the Contact Group – a body consisting of the US, France, Germany, the UK, Italy and Russia.

21st July 2007

Guardian journalist Ian Traynor reported, 'Kosovo to declare independence despite Russian opposition.'

'The government of the contested Balkan province of Kosovo yesterday said it would issue a unilateral declaration of independence within months in exasperation at western capitulation to a Russian veto threat in the UN security Council. As Washington and European countries abandoned the latest attempt to push through a Security Council resolution paving the way for Kosovo's formal secession from Serbia, the Kosovo Prime Minister, Agim Ceku, before leaving for talks in the US capital, said Kosovo independence would be declared on November 28th.'

21st August 2007

The International Crisis Group said that the EU must accept responsibility for guiding Kosovo towards independence or risk fresh bloodshed in the Balkans and that Brussels must step in before Kosovan leaders, frustrated with failed talks, declare unilateral independence from Serbia.

The International Crisis Group said that such a move would tear apart the territory and destroy progress made by Nato since the end of the conflict,

The ICG warned that if the EU 'mishandled' the issue, the 'genie of ethnic conflict would be let loose again.'

23rd August 2007

Julian Borger, diplomatic editor for the Guardian, stated, 'With little more than 100 days to go until a UN deadline for a negotiated solution on the disputed Serbian province, there are no signs of compromise. Kosovan leaders are vowing to declare independence when the deadline passes on December 10th. Kosovo's Serbs, who have Belgrade's support, said they will resist a unilateral declaration of independence, and have warned of new war in the region.'

18th September 2007

After nearly a year of negotiation and exactly a month before the opening of the exhibition, Fragile State : Art from Kosova, The Independent reported that, 'Independence for Kosovo is off the agenda.' It reported that, 'The international community is backing away from a clear endorsement of independence for Kosovo. According to the top European negotiator, Wolfgang Ischinger, Kosovo is no longer being offered internationally – supervised independence from Serbia, in an apparent concession to Belgrade and Moscow that is likely to infuriate the disputed province's ethnic Albanian majority.'

28th September 2007

As I write the BBC has just reported that there has been no breakthrough on Kosovo's status at talks in New York between Kosovo Albanian and Serbian leaders and that talks will continue in Brussels on the 14th October.

Diplomats from the US, the EU and Russia are due to report on the current round of talks to the UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon by 10th December when a final decision is due to be made on the future status of Kosovo.

On the same day, Jonathan Steele wrote in the Guardian, 'The rest of Europe should stand firm, and tell Belgrade and Moscow that the train has left the station. The war in Kosovo was not about spurious claims of WMD. It was not intended to bring regime change in Belgrade. Its aim was a limited and legitimate attempt by a country's regional neighbours to halt atrocities and reverse ethnic cleansing on a mass scale. It was also the first international effort to put the UN's tentative new concept - the responsibility to protect - above that of national sovereignty.'

Kosovo's Prime Minister, Agim Ceku, has made it clear he will accept nothing short of independence under UN supervision at the end of the negotiating process on 10th December.

Serbian President, Boris Tadic, has warned the UN General Assembly of 'unforeseeable consequences' if Kosovo declare independence unilaterally.

The future status of Kosovo is indeed in a fragile state.

Let us hope that the UN secretary general's special envoy, former Finnish president Martti Ahtisaari's proposal for Kosovo status which, 'provides the foundation for a future independent Kosovo that is viable, sustainable and stable, and in which all communities and their members can live a peaceful and dignified existence' is not lost.

James Walmsley, 30th September 2007

MANCHESTER AID TO KOSOVO

An 8 year journey has led Manchester Aid to Kosovo (MaK) from the 'Brit' public house in Urmston where the charity formed in March 1999 to a major international exhibition in Stockport Art Gallery.

A charity staffed fully by volunteers, during MaK's first two years over 1,000 tonnes of crisis aid was collected and driven to the Balkans. MaK also supported evacuated refugees, many of whom have now returned home to rebuild their lives.

Manchester musicians rallied round, creating the MaK Cohesion album (2001). Now international stars, many contributors played at the central Manchester festival, Cohesion Live (2006), for MaK.

MaK has worked with the Imperial War Museum North since its planning stage, helping to collect and create exhibits including its groundbreaking presentation, 'Children and War'.

More recently the charity has also enjoyed a two-year collaboration with Stockport Art Gallery and with Vernon Mill artists' collective.

Highly committed to peace and justice, in 2003 MaK provided witness support in a landmark domestic war crimes trial in Serbia involving medically evacuated Kosovar children brought to Manchester. The children had become highly involved in the charity, steering it towards greater involvement in regeneration projects including the creation, in Kosova near the site of the massacre of their family, of the 22 acre Manchester Peace Park.

Artists in both Kosova and Greater Manchester have gravitated to the charity's work. The arts can aid post war recovery. The Manchester Peace Park, close to the Serb border in Podujevë, Kosova, has become the catalyst to several collaborative arts projects including the formation of young artists in Kosova as Vizioni i Paqes (Vision of Peace). Vizioni now works with British artists Mike Anitt (currently developing a foundry project in Kosova), Paul Cliff, Matt Raw, Rebecca Davy and others. Hosted by MaK and its partner organisation, Cornwall's Eden Project, and supported in part by Arts Council England, eight Vizioni i Paqes members underwent a four week collaborative arts programme in the UK in 2005. The UK was enriched by their contribution whilst the artists returned home to apply all they had learnt to their communities, including teaching art in schools in Kosova.

In a sense this was just the beginning.

The young artists enthusiastically linked MaK, now working with Manchester curator James Walmsley (facilitator of the highly acclaimed exhibition Visions of Zimbabwe, Manchester Art Gallery 2005), to the leading arts practitioners in their home country, many of whom were known to them as university professors. Two years of research and development followed in the UK and Kosova, co-ordinated in the Balkans by tenacious, young Vizioni i Paqes leader Fazli Blakçori. This revealed an extraordinary body of work: creativity born out of conflict, struggle and separation. Now, for the first time, this can be seen in the UK.

The project has gone full circle. Saranda Bogujevci, the oldest of the medically evacuated children who were catalysts to the Manchester Peace Park project in 2000, is studying art in Manchester and a member of the Fragile State curatorial team. Another superb outcome is that Fragile State artists are now creating work for the Manchester Peace Park.

MaK members and Vizioni i Paqes are researching the development of a collaborative international arts network involving Kosova.

The years of isolation have ended.

Pam Dawes

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