

GAZIMESTAN

"Isolation – irrespective of the number of people involved – is a measure which encumbers not only those affected, but all of us. As President of the Presidency my position is that the isolation of the Kosovo Albanians should be lifted. The Presidency has been informed that the isolation measure now applies only to a very small number of people and that even this will be removed in the very near future. I firmly advocate judicial procedures being conducted in the proper manner, consistent respect for the Constitution and the laws, and, within this framework, for the rights, responsibilities and equality of all citizens without regard to ethnicity."

(Excerpt from a reply to an open letter by the internees at Bileća and Ivanjica, 9 June 1989.)

The Kosovo question dragged on for the entire year I was President. I wanted to deal with other issues, particularly the economy, but the Yugoslav Presidency had relatively little jurisdiction in matters concerning the economy, while its powers were wide-ranging in the areas of domestic and foreign policy, and, of course, in the military as the

commander-in-chief of the JNA. The Kosovo crisis had begun some considerable time earlier but reached a peak at the end of 1988 and the beginning of 1989 when, after major Albanian demonstrations, the previous Presidency had introduced a state of emergency in February. The state of emergency meant a series of measures which restricted freedom of movement, introduced very stringent police control, limited communications, including with the media, and saw several hundred people who had taken part in demonstrations and who were alleged to be the main opponents of the Serbian regime being taken off to special camps in February. This last measure was termed "isolation", and was in effect internment. When I took over as President on 15 May all these measures were already in place. People were already locked up in the camps without judicial procedures having been followed. What was happening in Kosovo was an ethnic conflict between Serbs and Albanians. The Serbs were trying to limit the autonomy which the Albanians enjoyed as a province within the Republic of Serbia. This the Albanians resisted, staging demonstrations that resulted several times in violent clashes. They wanted their own republic. But the Serbs regarded Kosovo as an ancient Serbian province, the cradle of the Serbian nation. In their relations with Kosovo and with the Albanians they always reacted wholly irrationally. The Serbs wanted to raise the conflict to the federal level, in other words to use the instruments that the federation had at its disposal in order to quash the Albanian dissent. To do this they forced through a state of emergency in February. A special police detachment was stationed in Kosovo which contained people from all the Yugoslav republics, including Slovenes. At that time the whole of Yugoslavia was talking about the Kosovo crisis; it was the main bone of contention in Yugoslav domestic policy. Even the international public was watching the Kosovo problem closely. Many international institutions and Western governments were voicing their opinions, particularly on the question of human rights violations. Kosovo was a powderkeg that could explode at any moment. And there was particularly strong interest in the Kosovo question in Slovene political circles. The March Assembly at the Cankarjev Dom cultural centre was a political landmark. Aimed at supporting the Albanians in their struggle against the Serbs, it was attended by all the prominent Slovene politicians. The meeting stirred up a huge response in Serbia and aroused strong anti-Slovene sentiment.

Years later, the Serbs were still unable to forget Cankarjev Dom. It had become a kind of synonym for Slovene support to Kosovo and Slovene opposition to Serbian politics and Serbian hegemony. When I took over as President I was immediately confronted with the Kosovo issue. What to do with Kosovo? Most of the members of the Presidency, virtually all of them in fact, were strong federalists. The Serbs had quite convincingly defended the stance that the Kosovo question was a matter of the integrity of Yugoslavia, that it was the constitutional obligation of the Presidency to protect the integrity of Yugoslavia, and that it had the powers, the instruments, to do so - using the police and the Army: in short, using the instruments of repression. The Serbs saw no other possibility in Kosovo. My idea was to tackle the problem through dialogue. That might appear to have been somewhat naive, perhaps it still does. I advocated a peaceful solution to the Kosovo conflict, and the establishing of a dialogue between representatives of the Serbian regime and representatives of the Albanians in Kosovo. But the Serbs rejected any kind of dialogue with the Albanians, except with those who were part of the state regime and supported the Serbian side. In the eyes of the Serbs, the Serbian leadership and the Serbian media, any dialogue with the opposition and with the alternative Albanian movements was a betrayal of the highest order and drew withering attacks from politicians and the media, as well as repressive measures.

At the beginning we dealt with Kosovo at every session of the Presidency. I tried to reduce the number of emergency measures in Kosovo systematically, step by step. Right from the start it was clear – from a series of talks I held with all the members of the Presidency and with the Serbian leadership – that it would be pointless to press for an immediate lifting of the state of emergency in Kosovo, since the Presidency would not support it. At each session the interior minister presented the dramatic state of affairs in Kosovo. The situation was always represented in such a way as to undermine in advance all the arguments for a complete lifting of the state of emergency. What I tried to do, with some success too, was to have one of the extraordinary measures of repression lifted at each session and so normalise the situation in Kosovo step by step. This continued on and off for the entire year I was President, up until April 1990 when we managed to have the

state of emergency in Kosovo lifted completely. In May and June of 1989 the situation had been far too tense. At that time the measure known as "isolation" began to attract a good deal of publicity. I received a letter from some of the former internees at Bileća, signed by a number of prominent individuals, asking me, as President of the Presidency, how we could permit such camps in Yugoslavia today. My reply to them was that I advocated the abolition of these internments. I raised the matter at each session of the Presidency. I held many informal discussions, including with the Serbs. But in my public appearances I was cautious. At that time I thought that, in reality, I had two possibilities: I could begin sticking my neck out in public and attacking the Serbs, which, especially in Slovenia, would have been much appreciated but would probably have had no real effect. The Presidency would have split, or more likely I would have been alone against all the others and against the Serbian leadership. The effect would have been confined to the media; my popularity would have risen in my own environment but the chances of solving the problem in Kosovo would have diminished and the situation would probably have deteriorated. The second option was lower-profile, using persuasion and force of argument. I spoke many times with Jović, with Milošević, with General Kadijević, General Gračanin and with the other members of the Presidency. I managed to establish a mood within the Presidency favouring the abolition of the camps. Reluctant though they were, the Serbs had to yield, gradually, and release the internees from the camps. This was the tone I set at the joint meeting of the Presidency and the presidents of all the republics and provinces on 21 June 1989. Slobodan Milošević, by then already President of Serbia, was among the participants. The great Serbian national holiday was approaching - commemorating the 600th anniversary of the Battle of Kosovo. The Serbs were preparing a major celebration, set to take place on 28 June 1989. Even the Yugoslav Presidency discussed it. The Serbian leadership and the Ministry of Internal Affairs informed us that there was a possibility of disturbances, that the Albanians would probably try to provoke incidents of one sort or another on the day itself. Another question raised was that of who would attend the celebrations. There was a real fear that the Serbs would exploit the occasion as a demonstration of Serbian nationhood, at a time when they were exerting pressure on the Albanians and trying to

reduce Albanian autonomy. How would the Yugoslav public react to these celebrations? How would the international public react? Should we, the members of the Presidency, participate in the celebrations or not? This last question was particularly important for me as President of the Yugoslav Presidency. If I were not to attend, it would be seen as a strongly anti-Serbian move, which would cause great offence and most probably bring to a halt what I had been trying to achieve over the previous two months – a dialogue in Kosovo, an easing of the repression, the lifting of the state of emergency, the abolition of internment and the normalisation of the situation. Yet if I were to attend the celebrations it would provoke attacks from the other side, from what was called the democratic public, particularly in Slovenia. They would see it as giving support to the Serbian regime, especially as I was a Slovene in the role of President of the Presidency. Faced with this dilemma, I thought long and hard about what I should do. I called Janez Stanovnik, the President of the Slovene Presidency, to ask whether he thought I should go to Gazimestan. Stanovnik replied that while it was a tough decision, if I went then he would go to Gazimestan too, as Slovene President, along with the presidents of all the other Yugoslav republics and provinces. Stanovnik was not a typical politician and he had considered these issues in much the same way as I had. He was well-intentioned and constructive. He wanted to sort things out, improve them, not engineer a crisis and a collapse merely on the assumption that something better might emerge. The collapse of Yugoslavia posed too great a risk, and a very bloody one too, judging by the benefit of hindsight. The day before the celebrations I was still undecided. I invited General Kadijević, the defence minister, for a discussion. He thought that I should attend the celebrations since it was a federal matter which should not be left to the Serbs alone. He expressed certain reservations about the Serbian leadership and agreed that things in Kosovo needed calming down and that repression was not the way to go about it. It had been suggested that the Albanians might cause disturbances but Kadijević did not believe it would come to that. Nevertheless he did assure me of complete security from the Army. In fact, the entire arrangements for my visit to Gazimestan were in the hands of the military. He promised that he would use his influence to have the extraordinary measures and the internment in Kosovo lifted, but saw it in the context of a calming of the

situation and also my attendance at Gazimestan. If I were to stay away, then a dialogue with the Serbs on these issues would be impossible. The situation would deteriorate. I had similar talks with Jović, who was the Vice-President of the Presidency and a highly enthusiastic advocate of Serbian policy in Kosovo. He said that my participation at Gazimestan would put the Serbs under an obligation and that we could expect a return gesture in the form of a relaxing of the situation in Kosovo. He would support the closure of the last Albanian camps. General Petar Gračanin, the interior minister, was of the same opinion. After all these discussions I decided to go. In the morning we flew from Belgrade to Priština. In the plane I was accompanied by General Kadijević and Ante Marković, the federal prime minister. We talked about the celebrations. I had the feeling that neither Kadijević nor Marković were too happy to be going. Both regarded the affair more in terms of rescuing the federation and preventing further conflict than supporting the Serbian regime. One or two cutting remarks were made about the Serbian leadership. I felt quite uncomfortable. But I treated the whole thing as a necessary evil, something I just had to endure since the anticipated pluses were greater than the minuses. We landed in Priština, where a guard of honour awaited us. After the ceremonies, which I had to attend to as President of the Presidency, we climbed into a military helicopter which took us to the site of the celebrations near Gazimestan. From the helicopter, even from a distance, we could see the mass of people swarming towards Gazimestan. Kadijević reported that everything was peaceful, that no incidents had occurred and that the Army had everything secured. We transferred to Army jeeps and continued to the site itself, where Milošević and other Serbian notables were waiting for us. Milošević was in a euphoric mood. He accompanied me to the hospitality tent, where the other members of the Presidency, other politicians and members of the diplomatic corps were already gathered. They presented various guests to me. I remember some of the ambassadors remarking that my participation at the celebrations was of great importance for a peaceful outcome to the crisis in Yugoslavia. But there were no ambassadors from the European Community or the United States. They told me later that they had agreed to stay away, and that if they had known I would attend then they too would have come, but they were not informed in time. They were

particularly sorry when I explained the reasons why I attended. A great memorial stone had been erected at Gazimestan, and a large stage. Milošević, obviously, was the main speaker. In the background, behind the tents, I noticed military vehicles, concealed and camouflaged. Milošević clearly wanted to have his day. He was extremely friendly throughout, although while he was accompanying me to where the celebrations were to be held he broke one or two rules of protocol, which amused me at the time because I was not too fond of the protocol anyway. But it was shown on television and people made a big deal out of it, particularly in Slovenia. Because I was the main guest they sat me in the front row, which was occupied by leading members of the League of Communists of Yugoslavia as well as prominent figures in the Orthodox Church. During the short programme of cultural events Milošević sat beside me. I remember him looking back several times to try and see how many people had turned up. Kadijević said they thought there was around half a million, which Milošević thought was an underestimate. He was sure there was more. After a while he said there was a million. And then after his speech, which was highly charged with Serbian emotion, he told me there was already a million and a half. By the evening the Serbian media were talking of two million. Immediately the celebrations had ended I departed, returning first to Belgrade, as fast as I could by the same route and the same means, and then home to Slovenia, where I tried to forget it. In the following weeks the remaining Albanian internees were released from their camps, from their "isolation". I tried to make the most of my participation at Gazimestan in order to have more of the emergency measures in Kosovo lifted. I did this at practically every session of the Presidency and in all my informal talks outside the sessions themselves. I also insisted that every instance of improper treatment of internees in isolation be investigated and that everyone responsible be punished. I managed to have this adopted as the policy of the Presidency. Eventually, criminal proceedings were initiated against those police officers who had mistreated the internees. But I had not yet managed to achieve a complete lifting of the state of emergency in Kosovo. I made proposals, I tried, but I could only achieve a partial lifting of the special measures, including the ban on absence from work. Unfortunately, the Kosovo episode was not yet over.