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Will I Ever Go Home Again?

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I am 18 years old, a college freshman, and I have been a refugee from the war in the former Yugoslavia for the past 11 months. My family lives in our hometown of Sarajevo. From time to time I hear by way of a fax that they are alive. To me, this means they were alive. The last time I talked with my relatives was June 1992.

My mother is a doctor in a hospital for children who are victims of the war. She walks to work nearly every day—a 30-minute trek under the threat of sniper fire and hand grenades. My older brother, a university student, drives a doctor around town, in our car, for medical emergencies. My father died three years ago, before the fighting began. After our apartment on the outskirts of the city was bombed last summer, my mother and brother moved in with my elderly grandmother. I worry about them. As the war drags on, every minute that passes may find me left alone in a foreign country. In war, a minute is all it takes.

When I first came to America as an exchange student in August 1991, everything was normal at home. There was fighting in Croatia, but no one in Bosnia believed that it would happen there. I heard from my mother in April 1992 that the war had reached Sarajevo. As it began to appear on the TV news in America, lots of people started to ask me what was going on. I'd try to explain that Bosnians are not a barbaric people, killing for the sake of killing. I would explain that we had all lived together as a nation. We were friends and neighbors and now some of us were enemies. Then I'd find myself thinking, I don't know the reasons for what is happening to my country. If I can't understand, how can anyone who's not directly affected by it?

Now, nearly a year later, my American friends at school don't even mention the war to me because they realize how disturbing it is for me to talk about it. But there are days when I can't stop thinking about it. I used to watch TV reports on the fighting. I saw people running from snipers and children screaming. I saw pictures of people lying dead and covered in blood. I stared at their faces because one of them could be my brother, my mother, my friend. I became obsessed. There was no choice then but to stop watching and even talking about it. Somebody loves these people who are dead in the streets. Somebody is waiting for them to come home. How do they feel when they find out their loved ones will never walk through the door again? For me, these days come and go, but in Bosnia this is life.

I thought that everyone would feel as horrified as I did. But the world has been watching for months and not acting. What is happening to humanity? Sometimes I think we all could use a basic reminder: these are human lives that are being thrown away. Little kids are being killed. Women are being raped. There are massacres going unreported. Is there any excuse for it?

Help from the outside world is the only light in this long night of the Bosnian people. The United States needs to know that this is not just a settling of an old ethnic feud. Most of the fighters are

just ordinary citizens who care about their country and are willing to go to war to protect it. (At least that's what they believe they're doing.) They're just like patriotic Americans-only not so lucky.

I disagree with the experts who call this a purely civil war. This is a war about power. One country is attacking another and taking territory away. In the process, everything is being destroyed. Atrocities are answered with atrocities. Nobody has made it clear how many thousands of Serbs are fighting alongside the Muslims and Croats they are supposed to hate. Nobody has said how many of them are just as devastated by these events.

It seems to me that no one has talked seriously about what the U.S. military could do to end the bloodshed. Yes, my country is mountainous, but it's not much worse than some parts of Europe where battles of World War II were fought. Yes, the soldiers are experts at guerrilla warfare, but they are no match for bombers. Yes, this is a complicated situation, but there is a right and a wrong to it.

When war broke out, the Bosnians were hoping for international assistance. They waited for months before the first United Nations relief forces showed up. Those who were attacked had no guns. Now, they are arming themselves because they see no other way out. International apathy is forcing them into battle. They are desperate people. They are weak and alone.

I do not see a valid reason for Serbia to have started a war. (Is there ever a valid reason?) Ethnic Serbs were not really in danger, at least not in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Sometimes I'm asked why the Serbs would want a land that has been totally wrecked. Ludilo, the Yugoslavian word for madness, is all I can say. It is madness that is responsible for smashing the beautiful Sarajevo that Americans saw on TV during the 1984 Winter Olympics.

We lived in peace for 50 years. We were neighbors, friends-Yugoslavians. I grew up never hearing ethnic hatred or plans for war. I loved summers in Sarajevo, when everyone would walk the long main street in the evening, stopping at cafes filled with friends and happy laughter. My friends and I were normal teenagers. We wanted to have fun, go to movies and parties and shop. We didn't choose friends based on whether we were Serbs, Croats or Muslims. Now I can find no words to express my disappointment in my people or in humanity as a whole. How can I trust friends or neighbors if I return home someday, knowing that they might be willing to kill me? How can I learn to talk to people again, after being cut off for so long? These are my thoughts as someone living far away from the destruction. Imagine what it's like to actually be there and go through the horror.

It has been a long time since the war started. The world is letting it happen. Does anyone really care, or is everybody just pretending? I am just not sure anymore.