

# THE SITUATION OF THE HUNGARIANS IN VOIVODINA

(VOIVODINA = The name of the northern district of Serbia, formerly part of Hungary)

After the disintegration of Yugoslavia the situation of the autochthonous Hungarians in Voivodina is unsettled and unpredictable. They hope for international aid in the form of recognition and safeguarding the collective rights of national minorities. The national minorities need self-government and autonomy to survive in this region of Yugoslavia where no democratic traditions exist and intolerance against other nationalities manifests in the most violent forms. The implementation of autonomy and self-government is, however, unthinkable without international pressure on the Serbian regime.

It is the firm opinion of the Hungarians in Voivodina that there should be no double standards concerning the rights of minorities. It is unacceptable that while the Serb government promotes the struggle of Serb minorities in Croatia and Bosnia for independent statehood or at least complete territorial autonomy, it denies even the basic rights to national minorities (Hungarians, Albanians, Moslems, Croats etc.) in Serbia. These minorities constitute about 40% of the total population of Serbia, but the Serb government ignores their pleas for self-government and autonomy. The application of this double standard is not only humiliating and unacceptable for the national minorities, it is also feared that this policy of discrimination will worsen tension between the majority and minorities may lead to civil war. The Hungarians expect the international community to insist on the settlement of the minority problem on just terms.

The legitimate political organization safeguarding the interests of the Hungarians in Yugoslavia, the Democratic Community of the Hungarians in the Voivodina (DCHV) has worked out its ideas concerning the status of the Hungarian minority and submitted them to the Serb government. This triple-concept, including territorial and personal autonomy combined with local self-governing autonomies would provide a solution for all Hungarians, those who live in contiguous population blocks and those scattered among other nationalities. This arrangement would not violate the sovereignty of the Serbian State, nor would it interfere with the rights of other nationalities. The DCHV has submitted this plan to the Yugoslavia Conference 'at Hague and Bruxelles and presented this document to other international authorities and personalities who may play a role in settling the ethnic conflict within the former Yugoslavia. The plan suggesting this solution has met with sympathetic reception everywhere. This attitude, however only manifests at the level of moral support.

The DCHV has also submitted this plan to the Serbian government, but the present regime shows no inclination to begin a dialogue with the national minorities.

At the same time, the Serbian government hypocritically asserts that the national minorities enjoy "maximum minority rights" in Serbia. As a matter of fact, there has been considerable deterioration of the rights enjoyed by the minorities even in Tito's time. The Serb Parliament has recently passed more than two dozen Acts further restricting the minorities rights - from the use of their mother tongue at schools and use of names of their localities - to the dismemberment of contiguous Hungarian areas.

The Serb media too show a threatening attitude toward the autochthonous Hungarian population. The authorities do their worst to frighten and drive the Hungarians away from the land of their ancestors. As a result of this psychological warfare the Hungarian minority has already suffered irreparable demographic damage. Tens of thousands of mostly younger Hungarian men have been forced to flee the country because of various methods of "ethnic cleansing" such as forced draft into the Serb army, military court summons, prison punishments, physical mistreatment, etc.

Those opposing the ideology of the government have little hope of political change. Consequently more and more of the minorities leave the isolated country. The international blockade introduced at the end of May 1992 and strengthened at the end of April 1993 brought the economy of Yugoslavia close to total collapse. The majority of the factories and businesses closed down and can pay their employees on forced leave only by the grace of state subventions. Hundreds of thousands have lost their jobs, but even those who are working do not earn enough to buy the basic food items. The majority of the families have exhausted their reserves and cannot satisfy their basic needs.

The situation of the Hungarians in Voivodina is particularly tragic. It is feared that the atrocities of Eastern Bosnia will be repeated there. In Bosnia the Serbs drove away the Moslems by starving them. The same can happen to the Hungarians in Voivodina. The international humanitarian organization, UNHCR is now feeding 3 million people in former Yugoslavia. Not one gram of those thousands of tons of food and medicine has yet reached the Hungarians of Voivodina. If the situation remains the regime won't even need armed aggression to expel the Hungarians. Misery and starvation will drive them from the land of their ancestors.

The extraordinary political, economic and social indigence of the Hungarians in Voivodina caused them to establish a self-help organization. They established and registered the Vox Humana Humanitarian Service providing the instrumentality for eventual international aid. The humanitarian international aid is all the more necessary as the health and alimentation structure of the country has collapsed. The hospitals and nursing homes lack staff and equipment, medicine is not available, the surgeries are cold and the patients are starving.

The Hungarians of Voivodina, defenceless and unarmed, still want to stay on the land of their ancestors. Without international help they would gradually be forced to leave the land of their birth.

Australia, where many Hungarians live, among them many from Voivodina, has earned international esteem by its minority policy. The VHDC, on behalf of the Hungarians in Voivodina, now asks respectfully the responsible authorities, citizens and humanitarian organisations of Australia to

- raise their voice for the human rights of national minorities, including the Hungarians in Voivodina;
- study the autonomy plan of the VHDC and, if approved, support the Hungarians in their struggle for autonomy;
- to initiate steps with the humanitarian organisations to prevent, by their assistance, the forced mass exodus of Hungarians because of their deprivation and lack of basic necessities.