

# US Army Doctrinal Influence On the War in Bosnia

Mark Edmond Clark

**C**URRENT US ARMY operational doctrine directs commanders to shock and disrupt opponents across the spectrum of warfare, using relative combat power, if necessary, to defeat a larger force. Integrated and synchronized operations ensure the total application of military force and enable commanders to set the terms for battle so that the threat cannot resurrect itself. To gain early, decisive control over the opponent's center of gravity, doctrine emphasizes lethality, tempo, decisiveness and operational depth.

Exercises at the National Training Center, Fort Irwin, California, have proved that it is no small feat for even the most able US commanders to implement the Army's doctrine effectively against a well-trained opponent. In most circumstances, other armies would have to introduce concepts into doctrine well in advance of its use. Successful performance under the doctrine would normally require special equipment, specific organization of formations and tough, realistic training. Further, the doctrine should be instilled at all levels.

Nevertheless, during the recent war in Bosnia, the commanders of *Armija Bosne i Hercegovina*—the Bosnia and Herzegovina army, working in conjunction with commanders of *Hrvatsko Vijeće Obrane*—the Croatian Defense Council, and *Hrvatska Vojska*—the Croatian army, proved to be an exception. Indeed, together, they applied US Army doctrinal concepts to turn the tide with maneuver and deep attack.

## Intent and Concepts for Operations URAGAN '95 and SANA '95

The summer of 1995 marked the third costly and exhausting year of war for the Bosnian Muslims and Bosnian Croats. Over 70 percent of the territory of Bosnia and Herzegovina was held by Bosnian Serbs; the number of soldiers killed was in the tens

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of thousands; and it seemed from the start that the conflict would eventually end in favor of the Serbs. Throughout the struggle, however, the government of Bosnia and Herzegovina fought to liberate territories of its state held by the Serbs. More progress on the ground from November 1994 to August 1995 and a new US peace initiative established conditions that finally made the achievement of the government's goal a very strong possibility. In addition, in August, the United States offered a new peace plan which was similar to that of the five-nation "Contact Group."<sup>1</sup>

The peace plan called for granting the Bosnian Muslims and Croats united as the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina 51 percent of the country's territory, while the Bosnian Serbs would receive 49 percent.<sup>2</sup> It also insisted that Bosnia and Herzegovina would become a single, nonpartitioned, internationally recognized state.<sup>3</sup> The Serbs had refused to respond to the US-brokered initiative throughout August, and some in NATO threatened to launch compensatory air strikes and have the UN arms embargo lifted to support the Bosnian government with weapons. When the Serbs attacked Sarajevo, and then failed to pull their artillery 12.5 miles away from the city as required, they triggered two weeks of air strikes at the end of August.<sup>4</sup>



When the plan was presented for the federation to undertake a massive offensive, it was immediately accepted. Both political and military officials agreed that federation soldiers and civilians urgently

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needed a great success to maintain their support for the war.<sup>5</sup> Operation *URAGAN* '95 would successfully link two corps, shorten the front approximately 2 miles and result in a drive north through central Bosnia. Operation *SANA* '95 would unite Muslim and Croat forces in the field and result in a drive across northern Bosnia to retake towns and cities. Both operations were named after Bosnian rivers. Through them, the federation hoped to strike a devastating blow against the Serbs that would end the war and open the way for a unified Bosnian state.

### **Advisement from the United States**

Upon witnessing the combat capabilities of *Hrvatska Vojska* in Operation *OLUJA* (STORM)—a four-day blitz on the Serb-held Krajina, Croatia—many military analysts immediately concluded that the success owed to US training and advisement.<sup>6</sup> In 1994, *Hrvatska Vojska* had signed a contract with Military Professional Resources, Inc. (MPRI), a Virginia-based company staffed with former senior field grade and general officers, for a program to train instructors about improving the army, especially its higher ranks.<sup>7</sup> The concepts and skills that MPRI provided *Hrvatska Vojska* were based on doctrine very similar to current US Army doctrine. Training and advisement under the same doctrine were apparently key to the success of the September counteroffensive for both *Armija* and *Hrvatsko Vijeće Obrane* forces in Bosnia.

There were many problems that the Croats and Muslims had to iron out before their forces could work jointly, not the least of which was the vicious

war fought between them in 1992 and 1993. Indeed, establishing the Bosnian Federation came largely through US insistence. The Muslims and Croats began integrating their military operations to combat the Serbs in 1994, eventually setting up a joint command, exchanging military intelligence and shared command, control and communication networks.<sup>8</sup> Despite their disputes, the alliance was strongest when *Armija* and *Hrvatska Vojska* forces physically linked in August 1995, just days before the September offensive.

### **Operational Planning**

General Sead Delic, II Corps commander and General Kadir Jusic, III Corps commander, were assigned the task of executing *URAGAN* '95. Their mission was to link their units and eliminate the threat posed by *Vojska Republika Srpska* (referred to here as "*Vojska*") using a 5.6-mile seam between II and III corps.<sup>9</sup> They were directed to eliminate the defenses at Mount Ozren.<sup>10</sup> In addition, they were to relieve units and citizens in the Podrinje region.<sup>11</sup>

*Vojska* commanders considered Mount Ozren an obvious *Armija* objective. They had amassed armor and artillery equivalent to four brigades to defend it.<sup>12</sup> The economy of force dimension also required *Vojska* units in central Bosnia to hold their positions while other operations were being conducted in western Bosnia.

Intelligence possessed by *Armija* forces allowed them to make detailed preparations. Delic stated that he "was almost afraid of the fact that we did not have any weak points in the preparations."<sup>13</sup> Massed artillery and 10,000 troops (six brigades) concentrated against the opponent.<sup>14</sup> The terrain for the attack was mountainous, not conducive to high mobility. However, *Armija* forces generated high speeds and maneuvered well from the first day of the operation.

### **The Players**

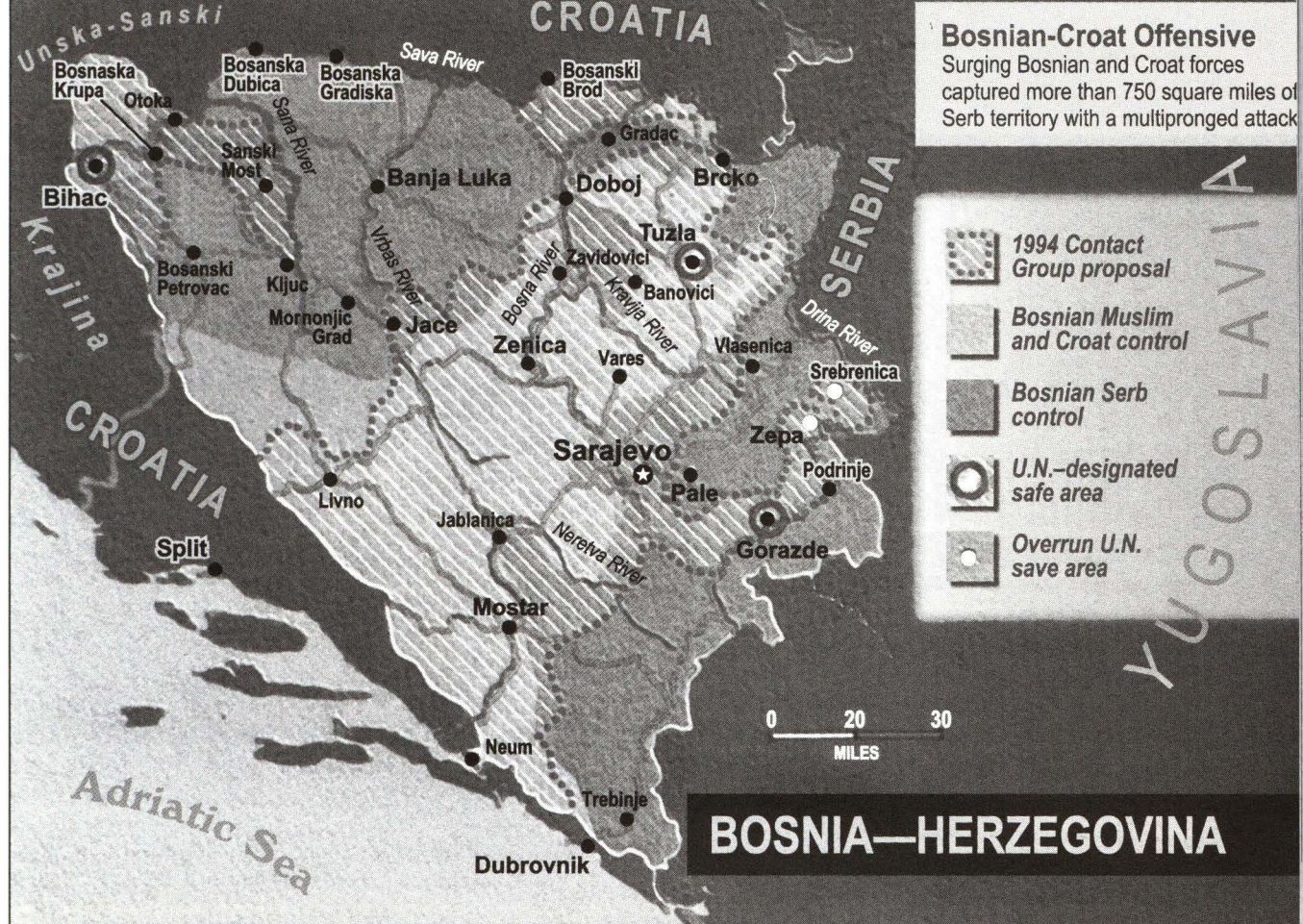
***Vojska Republika Srpska* —**  
the Bosnian Serb army (referred  
to in text as "*Vojska*")

***Hrvatska Vojska* —**  
the Croatian army

***Armija Bosne i Hercegovina* —**  
the Bosnia and Herzegovina army

***Hrvatsko Vijeće Obrane* —**  
the Croatian Defense Council





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Operation *SANA '95* would be a liberating march by government forces to retake towns and cities across northern Bosnia. V Corps, under the command of General Atif Dudakovic, would unify with units of VII Corps, under the command of General Mehmed Alagic. V Corps would then coordinate *Armija* efforts with, and fight alongside, *Hrvatsko Vijece Obrane* forces, under General Tihomir Blaskic, and *Hrvatska Vojska* forces with which it linked in August.

From previous military actions, V Corps had been able to amass captured ammunition and howitzers to help make further advances.<sup>15</sup> The peace negotiations had much to do with the timing of the offensive. In early September 1995, the Bosnian government expressed its desire to take land in northwestern Bosnia to strengthen its hand at the negotiating table.<sup>16</sup> *SANA '95* was the way to acquire territory quickly. The launch date for the operation was set for 13 September.

## The Impact of NATO Air Strikes

NATO air and artillery strikes began in Bosnia on 30 August 1995, after an apparent Serb mortar attack killed 38 people at an outdoor market in Sarajevo.<sup>17</sup> The strikes were suspended on 14 September after punishing the Serbs and greatly influencing events on the ground.<sup>18</sup>

From the first day, the strikes severely damaged *Vojska's* lines of supply, supply depots, command and control systems and communication networks, military barracks and installations.<sup>19</sup> The strength of *Vojska* maneuver elements fell as their tanks and artillery pieces were destroyed in large numbers.<sup>20</sup> The equipment and men lost could not be immediately replaced. Strikes against positions well beyond Sarajevo, such as Doboj and Tuzla, underscored a NATO and UN policy of "disproportionate" and wide-ranging responses to Serb provocation.<sup>21</sup>

The two weeks of air and missile strikes not only weakened forces but also allowed time to reposition





A 49th Fighter Squadron F-15 Eagle undergoes a pre-flight check at Aviano Air Base, Italy, prior to take off for air strikes on Serbian targets in Bosnia, 30 August 1995.

*NATO aircraft served as de facto close air support for the allied forces, complementing the ground attacks. Indeed, the strikes created a dilemma for Vojska commanders during the initial days of the allies' operations. When their forces attempted to maneuver rapidly, they exposed themselves to losses from the air interdiction. When measures were imposed to counter the air interdiction, they could not move fast enough to counter the ground threat.*

and improve the capabilities of *Armija, Hrvatsko Vijeće Obrane* and *Hrvatska Vojska* units. Further, when *URAGAN '95* and *SANA '95* were launched as part of the September offensive, three days and one day before the termination of the NATO strikes, NATO aircraft served as de facto close air support for the allied forces, complementing the ground attacks. Indeed, the strikes created a dilemma for *Vojska* commanders during the initial days of the allies' operations. When their forces attempted to maneuver rapidly, they exposed themselves to losses from the air interdiction. When measures were imposed to counter the air interdiction, they could not move fast enough to counter the ground threat. *Vojska* forces surrounding Sarajevo were effectively taken out of the fight. By exploiting these advantages, allied forces turned the tide of the war in only a few days, capturing numerous strategic points and about 30 percent of the territory that had been controlled by the Serbs.

### The September Offensive at the Operational Level

Acting in accordance with US Army doctrine taught by MPRI, *Armija, Hrvatsko Vijeće Obrane* and *Hrvatska Vojska* commanders intended to throw their Serb opponents off balance with a powerful blow from an unexpected direction and continue vigorous operations until the opposition was destroyed. Initiative, depth, agility and synchronization characterized the allied commanders' thinking and operations. Units had to fight to gain and retain the initiative. The allied commanders needed to attack *Vojska* units in depth with fire or, if possible, maneuver units. To do this, they had to synchronize all elements of combat power. Further, they were required to develop the agility necessary to shift forces and fires to points of *Vojska* weakness more rapidly than enemy units could respond.

**Initiative.** Initiative is both a state of mind and an action-reaction cycle that dictate the terms of battle to an opponent. Thus it is a highly contested



quality, and its balance swings on surprise, deception, speed of action, ingenuity and asymmetric comprehension. *Armija* commanders demonstrated their understanding of the importance of initiative throughout *URAGAN '95*.

Although *Armija* commanders' original operational plan for *URAGAN '95* anticipated only limited gains, they moved quickly to exploit the situation after the initial successes. Similarly, *Armija* achieved a rapid series of successes during *SANA '95*. *Armija* units fought to retain the initiative by pushing forward and taking a chain of towns along a major highway connecting the Bosnian government-held cities of Zenica in central Bosnia and Bihac in the northwest. This highway enabled them to bring enough supplies to continue rapid offensive. Although strong efforts were made to coordinate the actions of *Armija*, *Hrvatsko Vijeće Obrane* and *Hrvatska Vojska* forces, the reality in the field was that the latter did most of the fighting and provided much of the firepower during the offensive.<sup>22</sup> In the end, much of the territory they captured would later be returned to the Serbs or placed under the control of the Bosnian government under the Dayton Accords.

**Depth.** Depth requires both mental conceptualization and physical reach. It is applied as a reference to time, space and resources. For *URAGAN '95*, *Armija* commanders carefully planned for an attack against *Vojska's* depth, with artillery the main attack asset. Artillery units massed and struck hard at *Vojska* command and control positions and reserves.<sup>23</sup> The assault units destroyed command and control structures and cut lines of communication.<sup>24</sup> Many towns were taken and friendly road linkages were created.

Both the increased tempo of battle—through faster more mobile ground forces—and the increased ranges, accuracy and lethality of weapon systems have compressed time and space. *Armija*, *Hrvatsko Vijeće Obrane* and *Hrvatska Vojska* commanders employed long-range guns and rockets and fighter bombers from the moment *SANA '95* began.<sup>25</sup> The resulting flow of refugees before the advancing forces and disorderly state of *Vojska* defenses attested to the success of *Hrvatska Vojska's* efforts to shock, demoralize and disrupt its opponent and its ability to gain a decisive advantage early through its attacks in depth.

**Synchronization.** Synchronization required *Armija* commanders conducting *URAGAN '95* to manage the movements of great numbers of men and equipment operating both in tandem and coop-

eratively to produce combat power. It was key to achieving unity and efficiency of action.

In a military alliance such as that between the Muslims and Croats, there are great inhibitors to effecting synchronization. Differences in technology,

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doctrine and training act to erode efficiency and increase the potential for friction. These problems are not overcome simply through planning, although thorough planning is a key factor.

While the *Armija* commanders and the Bosnian government suffered disagreements and disappointments over some actions taken by *Hrvatsko Vijeće Obrane* and *Hrvatska Vojska* forces, they still managed to coordinate and cooperate. Combat power and its means of support were brought to bear at the right time and place to win.

**Agility.** In battle vulnerabilities and opportunities open and close continuously; victory goes most often to the commander and force with the balance and insight to strike and shift within these windows. Applying strength against weakness in the advance reflected *Armija* commanders' understanding of this concept. However, given the challenge presented to the allied commanders in using operational concepts contained in US Army doctrine, some problems degraded agility during *URAGAN '95*. As a result of the rapid advance in the operation's first phase, a number of *Vojska* units were left cut off in the II Corps rear.<sup>26</sup> *Armija* commanders chose to divert manpower dedicated to the advance to clearing of the rear, effectively slowing the operation's tempo.<sup>27</sup> Moreover, heavy losses were incurred during the engagements with the remnant units of *Vojska*.<sup>28</sup> In addition to *Vojska* small units in their rear, II Corps units encountered great problems from scattered land mines and minefields.<sup>29</sup>

Once the early counterattack launched by *Vojska* in response to *SANA '95* was repelled, *Armija* commanders recognized that their forces presented an overwhelmingly superior force and they acted to





Serbian T-54/T-55 tanks awaiting orders on a Bosnian road.

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fully exploit the situation. Units were driven as rapidly as possible through the retreating *Vojska*.<sup>30</sup> They paused long enough only to consolidate their gains and resupply.<sup>31</sup> UN observers noted that retreating *Vojska* forces could only react and were unable to regain the initiative.<sup>32</sup> Only *Vojska* units well to the rear of the forward lines could act to form defensive lines. However, they too suffered from relentless attacks in depth by *Hrvatska Vojska* artillery and *Hrvatske Zracne Snage* fighter-bombers.

### **Vojska's Defensive Actions**

Long before *URAGAN '95* was planned, *Vojska* units had established strong defense lines in the central Mount Orzen region and Vozuca area.<sup>33</sup> As *URAGAN '95* progressed, *Vojska* reinforced these positions. Nevertheless, when the operation began, the defenders were overcome by the massed *Armija* units. *Armija* established favorable combat ratios at decisive points. Establishing a static defense

against a large, mobile force such as *Armija* soon became a recipe for disaster. Additionally, NATO aircraft and missile attacks on the command and control structures had taken their toll. However, when holding ground became imperative, *Vojska* units began to hold fast at all costs. A senior *Armija* commander noted that "The Serbs have brought in a lot of troops to try and shore up their positions. There is a lot of new artillery and we are meeting stiffer resistance than we met two weeks ago, when most of the Serbs simply fled."<sup>34</sup> They slowed down the operation and inflicted heavy losses upon *Armija* troops.

There is some debate as to whether the rapid retreat of *Vojska* forces throughout autumn 1995 was more the result of political factors. From that perspective, the Serbs' retreat was not a rout but a well-organized withdrawal initiated as part of the Serb negotiation strategy during the talks to end the war. This idea supports reports by European observers that the Serbs had retreated without pressure. The



Serb decision to withdraw ostensibly calculated that the land relinquished would eventually be given up anyway in ongoing peace talks.<sup>35</sup>

However, it was also at this point that *Hrvatska Vojska* decided not to undertake any further operations in Bosnia.<sup>36</sup> Considering the important contribution in manpower and firepower that *Hrvatska Vojska* provided to the allies, its withdrawal may have also contributed to *Vojska's* defense of Republika Srpska during the period leading up to Dayton.

## Aftermath of Operations URAGAN '95 and SANA '95

In *URAGAN*, the Bosnian Federation secured over 280 square miles and placed *Armija* units in a better strategic position relative to *Vojska* units.<sup>37</sup> In *SANA '95*, the allies captured over 770 square miles of territory, but engagements did not end after the operation.<sup>38</sup>

The fighting finally stopped on 14 December 1995, when the warring factions agreed to a cease-fire. Bosnia was divided into two entities: the Muslim-Croat Bosnian Federation and the Bosnian Serb Republika Srpska. An Inter-entity Boundary Line was established, and a NATO-led force entered the country to support the implementation of the Dayton Accords. For the most part, the lines drawn at the end of the war were those lines established by the September offensive.

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It had been no small accomplishment for Bosnian and Croat commanders to master the thinking and actions necessary for operations patterned on US Army doctrine. The ability of allied commanders to mass fires and effects, protect the force, control the tempo of battle, achieve surprise and retain the initiative was decisive. During the two September offensives, allied commanders were able bring combat power and its means of support to bear at the right time and place to win. During the war, daily combat allowed *Armija*, *Hrvatsko Vijeće Obrane* and *Hrvatska Vojska* commanders to understand the battlefield, their opponent and their units. This understanding proved crucial to their assimilation and application of US Army doctrine concepts. **MR**

## NOTES

1. Steve Greenhouse, "U.S. Officials Say Bosnian Serbs Face NATO Attack if Talks Stall," *New York Times*, 28 August 1995, A6.
2. Ibid.
3. Ibid.
4. Roger Cohen, "NATO Resumes Bombardment of the Serbs," *New York Times*, 6 September 1995, A1.
5. "Bosanski Uragan" *Prva Linija* (Sarajevo), October/November 1997, 22.
6. Samantha Power, "The Croatian Army's Friends" *US News & World Report* (21 August 1995), 41.
7. Ibid. See Stephen Engleberg, "U.S. Took Calculated Risk in Not Curbing Croat Attack" *New York Times*, 13 August 1995, 1 and 8.
8. Roger Cohen, "Tension Undercuts Alliance of Muslims and Croats," *New York Times*, 9 October 1995, A8.
9. "Bosanski Uragan," 22.
10. Ibid.
11. Ibid.
12. Ibid.
13. Ibid.
14. Ibid.
15. Dzanic, "SANA '95," 26.
16. Chris Hedges, "Extent of Croat-Bosnia Advance Threatens U.S. Brokered Peace," *New York Times*, 19 September 1995, A1.
17. Stephen Kinzer, "Allies Say Serbs Have Pulled Back Guns at Sarajevo," *New York Times*, 21 September 1995, A1.
18. In August, the initial plan for air strikes tied to the peace talks was to "level the playing field." If talks had stalled and the UN had withdrawn, US officials were inclined to push for a multilateral lifting of the arms embargo, accompanied by six to 12 months of "compensatory" strikes against the Serbs. Greenhouse, "U.S. Officials Say Bosnian Serbs Face NATO Attack if Talks Stall," A6.

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20. Elaine Sciolino, "NATO Raids Against Serbs Are Increased," *New York Times*, 8 September 1995, A14; and Richard Sisk, "U.S. Flying Low in Bosnia Runs," *New York Daily News*, 6 September 1995, 10.
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22. Cohen, "Tension Undercuts Alliance of Muslims and Croats," A8.
23. "Bosanski Uragan," 22.
24. Ibid.
25. Mike O'Connor, "Bosnian Serbs Vow to Fight for Banja Luka," *New York Times*, 19 September 1995, A10.
26. "Bosanski Uragan," 23.
27. Ibid.
28. Ibid.
29. Ibid.
30. Mike O'Connor, "Bosnian and Croatian Troops Consolidate Gains as More Serb Refugees Flee," *New York Times*, 15 September 1995, A8.
31. Ibid.
32. Ibid.
33. "Bosanski Uragan," 22.
34. Chris Hedges, "Diplomats Talk Peace but Bosnia Presses the War," *New York Times*, 29 September 1995, A3.
35. O'Connor, "Bosnian and Croatian Troops Consolidate Gains as More Serb Refugees Flee," A8.
36. Kinzer, "Bosnian Serbs Fend Off Croatian and Muslim Attacks," A12.
37. "Bosanski Uragan," 23.
38. O'Connor, "Bosnian and Croatian Troops Consolidate Gains as More Serb Refugees Flee," A8.

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