

Report from Bonn by Rainer Apel

The strains of war, and of depression

The government's flight-forward will have a rough landing, if the administration can stay in power.

Among the NATO officials that President Bill Clinton met in Brussels on May 5, the first day of his two-day visit to Europe, was Klaus Naumann, the outgoing chairman of the alliance's Military Committee. It is not known what he told Clinton, but Naumann gave his assessment of the six weeks of air war on Yugoslavia to the media on May 4: NATO had missed many, if not most of its objectives, he said. It had underestimated the resistance of the Serbian regime, and it had failed to prevent the mass expulsion of close to 1 million Kosovar Albanians by the Serbs. Naumann said that NATO would continue its air war until conditions for a peace settlement were reached, and added that there was a consensus in NATO that no ground forces would be deployed before a cease-fire. How long the air war would last, Naumann would not speculate, but he said that it would be unable to prevent more Kosovar expulsions from taking place.

Naumann's remarks have been the most prominent to date among leading German officials, but such remarks can be expected from others in the coming days. The "red-green" government, however, is suppressing public discussion about the air war. Most telling about the state of mind of Chancellor Gerhard Schröder was a meeting in Bonn on May 3 of the national presidium of the Social Democratic Party (SPD), of which Schröder had been elected chairman on April 12. There, several party members, among them state section chairmen, leveled charges against Schröder and his cabinet on several counts: their lack of commitment to gather information

from NATO, and to pass available information on to bodies outside the cabinet; lack of commitment to tell the other leaders of the NATO governments about the existence of strong criticism of the air war inside Germany; and lack of commitment to insist on an increased German say in NATO on the operational side of the air war. It should at least be possible, critics told Schröder, that Germany insist that NATO focus strictly on military targets, instead of bombing all Serbian infrastructure, including civilian targets.

When the latter issue was raised, Schröder exploded, telling his critics that because Germany is not playing a leading role in the air war, it should not be too deeply involved in the details of military operations. In any case, he said, as long as he was Chancellor, he would not allow doubts to be cast on Western alliance policy.

But, how long will he be Chancellor? Despite all the internal criticism, the Social Democrats are not expected to cause real trouble for the government. But, there is the SPD's minor coalition partner, the Greens, where anti-war currents dominate 50% or more of party membership. Back during the second week of the NATO air war, when the war's critics were already gaining ground, the Green party executive, in an attempt to calm the waters, proposed a special party convention on the Balkans, for May 13 (by which time, they hoped, the air war would be over). With no end of the air war in sight, that convention may see a majority of the Greens voting against their own ministers in the Schröder cabinet. Then, will the government

fall, or will it backtrack from its pro-NATO position to stay in power?

If one takes the most recent statements by Schröder, Defense Minister Rudolph Scharping (SPD), and Foreign Minister Joschka Fischer (Greens) at face value, they will try to muddle through. Party strategists in the SPD and the Greens point out that the government is not seriously challenged, although opinion polls show a dramatic loss of popularity. If there were national elections now, this government would be voted out, and the Christian Democrat/Free Democrat opposition voted back in, by a margin of 7% or more. But, there is only one regional election, on June 6, in the city-state of Bremen, and the elections for European Parliament on June 13. The government pretends to be "confident" that it will not be challenged before a round of regional elections in September and October, by when, it hopes, the Balkans conflict will be over. But, it may fall over another issue.

The war is only one among several issues generating opposition to the government. The "tax reform" that went into effect on April 1, notably the ecology and gasoline tax, as well as cuts in tax rebates, for example, in the area of the popular part-time jobs below an income of 630 Deutschmarks per month, have caused the popularity rating of Schröder to fall from 47% to 39% during April. Despite the outrage over taxes, on May 4, Finance Minister Hans Eichel announced more budget cuts "without any taboos," which implies cuts in the social and welfare departments.

The government will find it much more difficult to make the mounting social unrest disappear, than NATO Serbia's infrastructure. And, many Social Democrats may find it easier to bring down the government over economic and social issues, than over the war.