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Peace Rebuff; 'This is not a simple war,' Wiesel is told in Bosnia

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Elie Wiesel brought his whisper-quiet style of peacemaking to this beautiful broken city yesterday, only to have it drowned out by raucous words of battle from the leaders of the warring factions here.

The Nobel Peace Prize winner, who is on a private human-rights mission through Bosnia, tried to instigate a little Camp David-style diplomacy by meeting separately with the leaders of the Serbian and Muslim communities, whose warfare already has cost more than 14,000 lives and is destroying this nascent nation. He urged them to sit down together and end the fighting, but the two used the occasion as a public forum for their usual grievances and refused to meet each other.

Wiesel, a wispy man with a look of perpetual sorrow, was a curious sight in his camouflage flak jacket and helmet, his armored United Nations vehicle hurtling through the rubble-strewn streets of **Sarajevo** on the way to a series of high-level appointments. As gunfire echoed in the hills, Wiesel stared at the children of this besieged city, who ran alongside his motorcade, waving and then pointing at their open mouths.

But Wiesel had little nourishment to give them. Though an aide distributed granola bars and Tootsie Pops to anyone who looked at all unfortunate, Wiesel came equipped only with good will, and he quickly found that objectivity has its limits in the Balkans.

After flying in from Belgrade on a UN relief-supply plane, Wiesel met first with Alija Izetbegovic, the president of Bosnia-Herzegovina and the leader of the state's Muslim defenders. He all but begged the president to sit down with the leader of the Bosnian Serbs, Radovan Karadzic, whose forces now occupy 70 percent of Bosnia. The Muslim, however, declined.

"This is not a simple war," Izetbegovic said. "This is genocide. You can meet your enemy but you cannot meet a murderer of people. Our people see not simple enemies. They see murderers."

Wiesel's method is to speak so softly and so sincerely that his interlocutors have no choice but to lean forward and listen closely. He deliberately presents himself as naive, in order to seem more reasonable.

Because of the horrors he witnessed as a prisoner in Nazi death camps, the Muslim writer Abdullah Sidram told him yesterday in **Sarajevo**, Wiesel is the one person on Earth who can best understand the situation of the besieged city.

His technique, however, has its drawbacks in places such as the Balkans, where manipulation of the truth has become a high art.

When he met with Karadzic later at a Serbian army barracks just outside town, for example, Wiesel used a nearby explosion of gunfire to ask, as simply as he could, why men were killing each other.

He told Karadzic: "We are here in a situation of total madness, total madness. I have a feeling we are in a suicidal society that used to live in peace, and now, somehow - it escapes understanding. I don't understand what is going to happen . . . How many more children have to die?"

But if he thought the Serbian leader would be humbled by the question and would respond at a similar level of simple reason, he was disappointed. Karadzic, whose forces have been charged with committing mass murder and atrocities throughout Bosnia, launched into the familiar Balkan refrain that the other side started it all and had done much worse.

Asked by Wiesel why the Serbians had destroyed the historic **National Library** in **Sarajevo**, Karadzic insisted it was the Muslims who had taken their books out of the library and then burned it because they didn't like its Austro-Hungarian architecture in the midst of their favorite Turkish buildings. Asked why so many western media accounts have held his forces responsible for vicious anti-Muslim policies of "ethnic cleansing," he said it was because the Croats have hired expensive American public relations agencies to plant such stories.

Faced with this level of argument, Wiesel could say little in response. In an interview with Newsday later in the day, he said he had never held high expectations for his peacemaking efforts, hoping only to improve the condition of the victims of all sides, even if slightly. To that extent, he may have achieved something yesterday by getting Karadzic to agree that several thousand Muslim prisoners held at the unheated Manjaca detention camp, which Wiesel visited on Saturday, would be released before it gets so cold that they freeze to death.

But Wiesel, the world's pre-eminent voice of the Holocaust's memory, said it was clear that mankind had learned little in the 50 years since the Nazi death camps.

"If anyone had told me in 1945," he said, "that I would have to come back to a country and visit camps . . . I would never have believed them."

LANGUAGE: ENGLISH

GRAPHIC: 1) Photo by Dusko Zavisic- Wiesel, at left in flak jacket, tours **Sarajevo** with Bosnian President Izetbegovic, center; man at right is unidentified. 2) AP Photo-Radovan Karadzic, left, leader of Bosnia's Serbs, also meets with Wiesel yesterday (Pg. 2 C)