

12/06/05  
Washington, D.C

**Voice of America  
FOCUS**

**Ethnic Disputes**

by  
Jela de Franceschi

**INTRO:** Many observers have described the 1990s as a decade when ethnic tensions in many parts of the world boiled over into open conflict. According to some analysts, the current decade has been characterized by efforts to repair shattered societies in regions where most of the conflicts took place, like the Balkans, the Caucasus, Central Africa, the Middle East and South Asia. V-O-A's Jela De Franceschi [YEH-lah de-fran-CHEH-skee], takes a closer look at some of the methods used to help people move from a divided past to a shared future.

**TEXT:** Contrary to the hopes of many people, the end of the Cold War was not followed by universal peace and prosperity, but often by instability and conflict. Perhaps the most dramatic symbols of this were the bloody breakup of Yugoslavia and the genocide in Rwanda. Casualties of those ethnic conflicts are estimated in the hundreds-of-thousands, with millions of refugees and massive destruction of property. After more than a decade of brokered peace deals, ethnic tensions in those areas remain high and redevelopment is stalled.

Many observers argue that even the best democratic reforms won't survive when the citizens they are supposed to serve distrust one another. They note that ethnic reconciliation starts with uncovering the past and looking at abuses experienced on all sides.

Karen Murphy, Director of International Programs for the New York-based organization Facing History Ourselves, says this can be a daunting task when memories of violence are still fresh and the destruction still visible. She cites the mass killings in Rwanda where about 800-thousand Tutsis and moderate Hutus were killed by Hutu militias during a few weeks in 1994.

**MURPHY:** *In a place like Rwanda, as opposed to say Germany and Europe during the Holocaust, the killing happened everywhere. The society was consumed by it. The killing wasn't behind fences and cordoned off. Children were killed in their classrooms and priests killed their parishioners. After mass violence, it is not as if a new population streams in, one that plays some kind of neutral role and that can educate everyone else.*

Ms. Murphy says almost 75 percent of Rwanda's teachers were murdered or imprisoned during the conflict. She adds that following the genocide, the

Rwandan government decided not to teach history for lack of an agreement on what history would be taught and how it would be taught.

Judy Barsalou, Director of the Grant Program at the United States Institute of Peace in Washington, says truth commissions are most often used to expose past brutalities and to ascribe responsibility for serious crimes. She says the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa is regarded as one of the most extensive attempts to examine gross human rights violations during apartheid, which lasted for more than five decades, until the mid-1990s.

*BARSALOU: Many white people in South Africa really did not believe that the Afrikaner government had been behind the attacks against the black population until the people came before the Commission and testified that they, as agents of the government, had committed terrible acts. Until that was on the record, it was very difficult for many white people to accept that these events had actually taken place as they had been alleged by some of the victims of this violence.*

Ms. Barsalou adds that the Commission's purpose was restitution not revenge.

But many analysts say since history shapes perceptions, a key ingredient of reconciliation is the way history is taught. They note that ethnic groups often assemble conflicting, even distorted facts in writing their historical narratives.

According to Charles Ingrao, a historian at Purdue University in Indiana, differing accounts of history have sown resentment and hostility among peoples who had coexisted peacefully at times in their past. He adds that historians, unfortunately, have always played a role in propagating national myths and that perhaps nowhere has this been more harmful than in the former Yugoslavia.

*INGRAO: Newly created states draft their own version of events. And frequently the history that they compose is very self-serving. It justifies the existence of the new state, much as it justifies the destruction of whatever it replaced. The history of each of the national groups is based on the desire to destroy any loyalty to what had preceded them. They all have created highly inaccurate histories that ignore multi-ethnic coexistence. They talk about how they were oppressed by their neighbors and they all nurture grievances that make it possible for politicians to mobilize them against the weaker groups among them.*

Professor Ingrao says revisiting history is key to restoring dialogue among rival ethnic groups. But he cautions that this process takes a long time and involves changes in attitudes, aspirations, even beliefs.

*INGRAO: Only by an honest narrative that takes into account the strengths and the weaknesses, the errors of omission and commission, as well as the accomplishments, can you come up with a blueprint for making changes and moving on. What we are teaching schoolchildren and what they will teach their own children, a generation later, is fundamentally destructive if, as in the case of former Yugoslavia, it's about conflict and the inability of people to live together in peaceful coexistence.*

Many observers agree that coming to terms with the past is vital to lasting peace and democratic development in societies trying to recover from the devastation and cruelty of ethnic conflict. They note that honestly confronting the sources and history of conflict helps establish a culture that condones neither repression nor violence.

For *Focus*, I'm Jela de Franceschi.