

Bosnia more than just 'civil war'

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WASHINGTON, April 21 (Reuter) - Secretary of State Warren Christopher said Thursday that Serb onslaughts in Bosnia amount to more than just civil war and demand robust international action to stop the bloody creation of a "Greater Serbia."

Christopher tried to lay down a firm policy justification for President Clinton's proposal for expanded allied military and diplomatic action in Bosnia before a panel of sceptical senators who kept asking why there, why now and why us?

Portraying a conflict that could embroil Europe in warfare and a tide of refugees, he said important U.S. and allied interests were at stake and took exception when Senator Ernest Hollings, a South Carolina Democrat who chairs the appropriations subcommittee, said the Serb-Moslem fighting was merely a civil war unworthy of U.S. military involvement.

"I think this is more than a civil war," Christopher said. "The aggression of the Serbs, I think, is quite transparent.

"They have in mind a Greater Serbia. They're looking to the south to Kosovo, possibly to Macedonia. They're moving into Bosnia and perhaps into Croatia."

His comments represented the fullest assessment yet of what the United States views as Serb military objectives. Last week, as Serbs advanced on Gorazde, U.S. spokesmen explained away allied inaction saying they did not know Serb intentions.

Christopher was following up on Clinton's announcement of Wednesday that he was proposing to NATO allies and Russia - another major player in efforts to negotiate a peace - that NATO vastly expand its threat of air strikes against Serb positions, tighten enforcements of economic sanctions and step up humanitarian relief efforts.

Clinton and Christopher both stressed that the objective of a bolder new allied effort would be to force the Serbs to the peace table, but said air strikes could also raise the price for continued attacks on besieged Moslem enclaves like Gorazde even if they could not stop them entirely.

NATO was expected to take up the Clinton proposal soon. Although Christopher said he thought discussion would begin Friday, NATO officials said no date had been fixed.

Allies like Britain and France, who have peacekeeping troops in Bosnia, have in the past opposed increased NATO air strikes, as has Russia, an ally of the

Serbs.

Hollings and others rubbed some political sore points by saying the administration seemed more interested in allied government support than that of the Congress, and noting it had backed away from comparable U.S. commitments in Somalia, Haiti and Rwanda, where only blacks were involved.

Christopher said the administration was consulting Congress regularly and that the difference between Bosnia and the other trouble spots was national interest.

"We're taking these steps because the United States has an important strategic interest and an important humanitarian interest in Bosnia," he said. "We have a strategic interest in preventing a broader European conflict ... in maintaining NATO as a credible force for peace in the post-Cold War Europe.

"We have an interest in stemming the flow of refugees and bringing the vast tragedy to an end."

Christopher said the time had come when "even a cautious secretary of state" like him must press for "a strong, robust position to ensure that this conflict does not spread."

Shortly after Christopher spoke, Senate Republican Leader Bob Dole and other senators of both parties introduced an amendment requiring the president to unilaterally lift the arms embargo against the Bosnian Moslems.

Although Clinton is often criticised for wavering on Bosnia and other trouble spots, taking softer positions than those he pushed as a presidential candidate, Christopher took a swipe at Republican predecessor George Bush on that score.

"This aggression began in 1992 on somebody else's watch," he said in reference to Bush, who left office in January 1993.

Christopher also tried to allay fears the Bosnia conflict was dividing the great powers into rival camps, with Moscow backing the Serbs and Washington the Moslems.

He said the United States was "in very close consultation" with the Russians who seemed "on the verge of being outraged" at broken Serb promises over cease-fires and peace moves.

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