Among the refugees: Notes from Macedonia

by Donald Ottenhoff in the June 16, 1999 issue

On the broad track of rock and dirt that runs through Cegrane, the largest refugee camp in Macedonia, a woman labors to push a wheelchair carrying a young boy with cerebral palsy. Nearby two young men join arms to form a human litter on which perches an old woman who is unable to walk. They are the vulnerable among the vulnerable. Illnesses and infirmities that made normal life difficult back in Kosovo add hardship to hardship under the stark conditions of the camp.

I spoke to a 16-year-old boy who watched with a look of stunned amazement as a steady stream of people passed by. He had arrived in Cegrane the day before from Pristina, Kosovo's capital, with his sick grandmother. Although he wanted to talk, he couldn't tear his attention away from the people moving about among the sea of tents. When I asked if he was OK, he nervously said, "There are so many people."

Every tent in every camp contains a particular story about how its occupants ended up in Macedonia, but the stories betray a pattern: Men wearing ski masks and brandishing weapons pound on doors and order inhabitants to leave immediately or be killed. Houses are looted and burned. Those fleeing are stripped of all valuables—cash, jewelry, cameras, cars, watches, identity papers—and forced on trains that take them to Kosovo's border with Macedonia. Often they are beaten; sometimes family members are shot.

I met Naser Bregovina; his wife, Mihone; their four children; and Naser's father Ibrahim, who were crowded into a tent that measures about 12 by 12 feet. When Serb paramilitary troops began operating in the region of their village near Pristina, the Bregovinas left their home and hid in the woods for eight days. When their food supplies dwindled, they returned home, only to be beaten by Serb police. Shortly after that, the residents of Naser's village, along with those of two others that lay close by, were forced to leave by Serb troops who moved house to house expelling occupants, looting and burning houses.

As a result of the attacks, said Naser, the three villages were largely destroyed and between four and eight people—in the confusion he wasn't sure exactly how many—had been killed. When I asked about a wheelchair that was folded and stored in the corner of the tent, Naser said that Ibrahim's wife was paralyzed. They had to carry her all the way to the train that transported them to Macedonia. She now lay ill in another tent. Naser worries about the coming winter—about how his family will stay warm in the canvas tents, and where they will get enough fuel to cook their meals. He said he would return to Kosovo, even if Serb troops still patrolled the region, if their safety were guaranteed by NATO. Without that guarantee, he said, it would be impossible to return.

I was given a map from the U.S. Agency for International Development office in Skopje which locates the nine refugee camps that were established in Macedonia since the refugee exodus from Kosovo began in late March. Cegrane is circled, indicating that when the map was released the camp was planned, not actual. By the time I visited Cegrane in late May, over 40,000 refugees were taxing facilities that had been designed for a much smaller number of people. A dense tent city had sprung up virtually overnight on the barren slope of a hill near the city of Tetovo.

When refugees like Naser and his family arrive in the camps they face a daily routine that revolves around the bare necessities—shelter, food, sanitation and sometimes medical attention. In Radusa, a relatively well-organized and well-supplied camp run by the Macedonian Center for International Cooperation—a local partner of the international ecumenical relief organization Action by Churches Together (ACT)—the Bulgarian army prepares two hot meals a day, and there is a cold breakfast served at 9:00 a.m. In Cegrane, bread, tomatoes, cheese and other supplies are handed out at distribution tents located throughout the sprawling camp. Shower facilities are available at Radusa but not at Cegrane, where refugees, most of whom arrive with only the clothes on their backs, must jerry-rig whatever bathing facilities they can. At Cegrane, the lines of refugees waiting to draw water are long.

Sanitation facilities are also a problem at the overcrowded camp. The original plans called for one pit toilet for every 40 people. At the height of Cegrane's overcrowding there were 90 people for every pit. By late May workers had reduced that number to one pit per 68 people, and were trying to reduce the number further. A fairly diverse and well-equipped staff of Bulgarian doctors, including a psychologist, gynecologist and neurologist, attends to the medical needs of refugees at Radusa. At Cegrane members of the Dutch branch of Doctors Without Borders have their tents pitched

just inside the camp entrance.

Boredom and camp fatigue is a constant fact of life for refugees. Volleyball nets have been set up for teenagers and young adults, and playground equipment for the children (at Radusa, children had improvised some stacked lumber into a first-rate teeter-totter). At Cegrane, children throng to a mini-amusement park just outside the main gate. The main attraction is a bumper car ride.

But adults are anxious about the prospects of camp life stretching into an uncertain future. Fatmir Maqastena worked as a translator for journalists in Pristina and now lives in tent 52B in Radusa—"B52," he says, "I like that." Fatmir argues that "no one can hold on for months in camps." He points to a house on the other side of the camp's fence. "I see that house and the only thing I can think about is how much I'd like to sleep there. We are so tired of camp life," he says. "Although I have nothing to do all day, and every day is the same, I am so tired. I need a rest from camp life."

Most refugees I talked to endured a traumatic flight from Kosovo, and sometimes their treatment at the hands of Macedonian border police was less than welcoming. Fatmir says he was beaten and pushed by border police who told refugees trying to cross to go back.

Western journalists who have reported these and other incidents, especially those broadcast worldwide on CNN, have in the eyes of Macedonians created an unfair and inaccurate picture of their country's efforts to assist Kosovar refugees. In a meeting with representatives of U.S. church-related relief organizations, Boris Trajkovski, Macedonia's deputy minister of foreign affairs, objected to the media's portrayal of Macedonia. "It is reported in the United States that we are mistreating refugees, refusing to feed them, and closing the border to them. None of this is true. . . . We are interested in helping the refugees, given our limited capacities. We are also interested in achieving stabilization within our own country." Trajkovski admitted that some border police had responded to the surge of refugees at the border with unnecessary force, especially at the beginning. "But we criticized ourselves and took measures to correct the situation. . . . We put ourselves at the disposal of the international community."

Some Western suspicions of Macedonia's treatment of refugees may have arisen from misunderstandings about the country's limited resources. Questions arose, for example, when refugees were transferred by bus at night. Charges were made that

Macedonia was trying to circumvent conventions on the transfer of refugees by moving them under the cover of darkness. When I asked about this a government official told me that Macedonia does not have enough spare buses to move refugees, so it had to borrow vehicles from public transportation. The best time to do this is at night, when buses can be spared from daily transit service. Whether or not such an explanation tells the whole story, it has a plausible ring to it.

The Kosovar refugee crisis has created a serious civil and social situation for an already struggling Macedonia. According to Trajkovski, Macedonia has been financing refugee relief operations since the beginning of the bombing on March 24, and the drain on the economy and government "may lead to a political disaster" for the country.

Approximately 25 percent of Macedonia's economy was linked to Yugoslavia (estimates vary); thus when the bombing began, around a quarter of the country's economy simply ground to a halt. In addition, Macedonia's major trade corridor to Western European markets, which account for anther large portion of its economy, ran directly north through Kosovo. That route, obviously, was shut down by the war.

The war has already cost Macedonia $250 million per month, Trajkovski says, while funds that have been promised by Western nations have been slow in coming. "We've been promised some $250 million in credits and fresh money, but until now we have only received $8.3 million from France," he asserts. The U.S. has promised $22 million, but those funds have been tied up in Congress. "We want to help," said Zoran Jolevski, Trajkovski's assistant, "but we don't want to go broke."

Add to these severe economic blows the social trauma of having over a quarter of a million people pour into a country of 2 million. Proportionately it's as though 30 million refugees had entered the U.S. in roughly eight weeks. It's hardly a secret that no love is lost between the ethnic Albanians in Macedonia—a sizable minority of about 25 percent—and the Slavic Macedonian majority, not to mention the friction between Albanians and Macedonia's smaller Serb minority. Ethnic Macedonians tend to view Albanians as aliens and a threat to national unity; Albanians charge that their civil rights are severely abridged within their own country. With the influx of Kosovar Albanians, ethnic Albanians now constitute about a third of Macedonia's population. Ethnic tensions, always high, have risen to a danger point.

The ethnic Macedonian population, as well as ethnic Serbs who live in Macedonia, view with reservation the attention being given the refugees, and the dollars being spent on them by their own government as well as by foreign governments and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs). They believe that Macedonia's own needy people and development problems are being neglected. Ethnic Macedonians also worry that the presence of an additional bloc of Albanians could tip the already delicate ethnic balance in the country, leading to greater separatist pressure from the Albanian regions of Macedonia (primarily in the west and northwest regions), or perhaps even to civil war. "Multiculturalism works when you have good economic conditions," said Jolevski. "Here, with a 40 percent unemployment rate, people are doing nothing, and social and ethnic tensions rise."

Consequently, while the Macedonian government has cooperated conditionally, and not always enthusiastically, with NATO, ethnic Macedonians uniformly oppose the bombing of Serbia. In Skopje's city center a vigil has been held daily that condemns NATO as fascist and calls for a halt to the bombing. When CNN was conducting street interviews near the vigil site to gauge public response to the war, a Serb woman from Macedonia shouted into the microphone, "Tell Albright she's a bitch. Tell Clinton he's a maniac. Tell Tony Blair he's a devil. When the U.S. gives Texas back to Mexico, and when Spain gives the Basque lands to the Basques, then Serbia will give Kosovo to the Albanians." The crowd of citizens who had gathered burst into applause.

The practices of NGOs in Macedonia has also alienated many citizens. Repeatedly people I talked to ruefully commented that relief work had become the "biggest business in the world." Venko Temelkovski, assistant general director of pharmaceuticals for the Skopje-based Alkaloid Pharmaceutical Company, complained that ruthless contract-chasing by Western companies has effectively shut the firm off from relief agency revenue that could help Alkaloid make up its serious shortfalls due to the interruption of trade with Serbia. Only two international relief organizations, Washington, D.C.-based International Relief and Development, Inc., and Doctors Without Borders, are currently doing business with Alkaloid. "Our drugs are as good as those of anyone else, and our prices are the best," Temelkovski said. "If the NGOs would buy from us it would help the Macedonian economy. Our products help without regard to color, religion or whatever else may be on people's minds. . . . We want to help as best we can. We also want to survive."

International Relief and Development, which has offices in Skopje, is an example of an organization that has made a point of doing relief work in Macedonia with an eye to local development needs. IRD recently contributed over $30,000 worth of medical and pharmaceutical supplies to the Tetovo Medical Center, using funds from the United Church of Christ's Board for World Ministries and the Disciples of Christ's Week of Compassion program. IRD is also in the process of distributing another $70,000 worth of pharmaceuticals, purchased locally from Alkaloid, to the Tetovo Center, as well as to other hospitals in the region. According to IRD's president Arthur Keys, "Our objective is to provide humanitarian relief in a place like Macedonia, and at the same time support the local economy as much as we can. Relief organizations can sometime solve short-term problems, but then leave countries no better off in the long-term. We want to do things differently."

The recently signed agreement between NATO and Yugoslavia may spell the end of the bombing, and perhaps the fighting in Kosovo, but the refugee crisis in Macedonia will last for a long time. Some observers estimate that it will take five years to move the refugees back to Kosovo—and even then probably not all will return. It may take Macedonia, already strapped before the war, even longer to recover. Helping Kosovar refugees and helping a struggling Macedonia should not be mutually exclusive enterprises.