

# Failing the internally displaced

by Roberta Cohen and David A Korn

The people most at risk in Kosovo throughout the long emergency were the internally displaced.

Whereas the 900,000 ethnic Albanians forced out of Kosovo received protection and assistance from the international community, those forcibly displaced inside basically remained unaided and unprotected. Between 24 March, when NATO airstrikes began, and 20 June, when Yugoslav forces withdrew, an estimated 400,000 to 500,000 people became uprooted within Kosovo.

## Assault and displacement

Unlike in other emergencies, most of the internally displaced were men. Serb forces separated tens of thousands from their families and prevented them from crossing to safety in Macedonia, Albania and Montenegro. Some were killed (estimates range up to 10,000); others were beaten, starved and detained; still others were used as human shields or forced to do physical labour. Many are still 'missing'. Most ominously, many hundreds are reported to have been taken to unknown locations in Serbia by withdrawing Serb forces.

Tens of thousands of internally displaced people managed to hide in the hills and mountains, partly protected by the Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA) although, as food and medical supplies dwindled, some may have perished. Others went underground, moving from one hiding place to another while still others moved around in caravans from village to village in search of shelter and food. Large numbers crowded into destroyed villages and cities where they faced daily persecution: taunts and threats by Serb soldiers, the refusal at times of Serb shops to sell them food, and the denial of medical help.



UNHCR/U. Meissner

Some internally displaced did not leave Kosovo because they were too old or infirm to make the trek or because they believed they might be safer at home (some areas were relatively unaffected). Others found borders closed to them or were barred from leaving by Yugoslav troops. Still others refused to go as a matter of principle: not to further the goal of 'ethnic cleansing'. How they survived – or did not – is a story only now beginning to be told. UN Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs, Sergio Vieira de Mello, who was allowed into Kosovo with a team at the end of May, reported that "the period from March 24 to April 10 saw a ram-

page of killing, burning, looting, forced expulsions, violence, vendetta and terror." Nothing, he observed, could possibly justify "the extent and magnitude of the brutal treatment of civilian populations."<sup>1</sup>

The systematic abuse of Kosovan Albanians did not, however, begin on 24 March; it only accelerated then. The International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) reported more than six months earlier that "tens of thousands of civilians are caught up in a devastating cycle of attacks and displacement ... exposed to violence, including threats to their lives, destruction of their homes,

separation from their families and abductions. Thousands of them have nowhere left to go and no one to turn to for protection.”<sup>2</sup> Indeed, as many as 250,000 were internally displaced in Kosovo before the bombing began. The total had been even higher earlier - about 500,000 - but half returned to their homes after the October ceasefire agreement between Serb forces and the KLA.

Throughout the crisis, forced displacement was a deliberate political and military tool of the Serbs. Initially, Serb forces sought to clear areas where the KLA had a strong civilian base. This quickly escalated into a plan to change the demographic composition of the province through expulsion.

### The role of the international community

In the face of this challenge, the international community placed only unarmed humanitarian staff on the ground prior

by all other humanitarian workers.

### The impact of military action

In such circumstances, military action, or the threat of military action, becomes the only means of deterrence. But in this case, the decision to take military action came late, and the military action chosen did not provide the needed protection. The military strategy selected by NATO to stop the uprooting and assaults was a long-term one that could not immediately defend Kosovan Albanians from attacks on the ground. The air strike campaign focused initially on military and industrial targets in the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia in an effort to cripple Milosevic’s overall capacity to wage war in the Balkans. Only later did NATO concentrate its air strikes against Serb forces in Kosovo.

During the three months that it took for the air campaign to succeed, internally displaced Kosovan Albanians were left

unprotected, and measures that could have been taken to help them were ruled out as posing too much of a risk to

NATO forces. Thus, air strikes were conducted from heights of 15,000 feet or more, even though lower bombing runs would have been more effective in stopping Serb forces and tanks engaged in

the door-to-door ‘ethnic cleansing’.

Lower strikes would also have lessened the danger of NATO missiles and bombs hitting caravans of internally displaced people, trains carrying the displaced to the border and patients in hospitals.

Likewise, airdrops of food and medicines to internally displaced populations were rejected by NATO and the UN as too risky - even when hunger began to be reported and deaths recorded due to lack of medicines. Only one courageous NGO - the International Rescue Committee - began to mount small-scale airdrops toward the very end of the military campaign. NATO also ruled out any move to create humanitarian assistance corridors or protected areas where internally displaced people could have fled *en route* to other countries or where they could have remained in safety until the war’s end.

Whereas NATO feared casualties, other opponents of safe havens pointed to the international community’s failure to protect the safe areas of Bosnia - in Srebrenica and Zepa in 1995. But there UN forces were lightly armed and had highly ambiguous mandates which they interpreted to mean that they should defend mainly themselves from attack. Well-armed NATO troops in Kosovo, protected by air cover, would have been another matter. Safe havens were also opposed by refugee advocates who argued that they would keep people trapped inside the province instead of allowing them to seek safety outside.

## Protecting the internally displaced would have meant taking risks

to 24 March. ICRC had a staff of 70; most other international organizations and NGOs had only minimal presence. The Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) did deploy 2,000 unarmed monitors - the Kosovo Verification Mission (KVM) - to verify the ceasefire. And while the KVM also took steps to end violence and deter abuse, it could not have been expected to stop the egregious violations of human rights and humanitarian law taking place. As KVM’s head, William Walker, pointed out, the verifiers were basically helpless in the face of massive troop build-ups by the Yugoslav army.<sup>3</sup> They also became the targets of threats, accusations and beatings, making it impossible for them to operate. ICRC, although specifically mandated to protect civilians in times of war, had to depart as well, joined

**Lacking proper building materials, a returning IDP tries to rebuild his house from rubble and mud, Nekovce, Glogovac Municipality.**



UNHCR/U Weisner

But in Kosovo not all those endangered could get out.

Although NATO in the end forced all Serb forces to withdraw, its intervention did not prevent the mass killings, deportations, rapes and other war crimes and crimes against the humanity now being investigated. Only the international regime set up to protect refugees operated reasonably effectively in the Kosovo crisis. The international community mobilized to meet the basic needs of food and shelter, as well as the security concerns, of the hundreds of thousands of Kosovan refugees who were deported or who fled over the border. But aiding the internally displaced was a challenge it was not prepared to assume.

### Assumption of international responsibility

Protecting the internally displaced would have meant taking risks. It would have meant credible threats of force early on to deter Yugoslav forces from their 'ethnic cleansing' campaign. It would have meant readiness to deploy ground troops as a publicly acknowledged option in order to give serious back-up to NATO warnings that the practices carried out in Bosnia would not be tolerated in Kosovo. It would have meant arrests of those indicted for war crimes and crimes against humanity in Bosnia so as to underscore this point. Once the air campaign had begun, it would have meant strikes directly targeting Serb forces engaged in the expulsions and atrocities. It would have meant the creation of humanitarian supply corridors and protected areas to provide immediate support to those trapped inside. At the very least, it would have meant the immediate air-drop of needed supplies. In sum, it would have meant the assumption of an international responsibility toward those being assaulted inside.

The Secretary-General's Representative on Internally Displaced Persons, Francis M Deng, has called upon the international community to take "bold steps" to address the perilous gap in the international system that leaves the internally displaced without adequate protection.<sup>4</sup> The President of the UN Security Council added his voice to this plea on 3 June when he drew attention to the need for "equal treatment" for refugees and internally displaced people worldwide.<sup>5</sup>

Surely it is time for the international community to begin to address the totality of humanitarian and human rights crises and overcome the myopic view that displacement can only be dealt with across borders but not within countries. Priority must be given in the 21st century to creating an international system that looks at both sides of the border and addresses protection needs in internal conflicts more comprehensively.

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1. Briefing to the Security Council, 2 June 1999, by Sergio Vieira de Mello, OCHA, New York.

2. Report of the Meeting of the Ad Hoc Working Group on the Protection of Persons under Threat in Kosovo, Brookings Institution, Washington DC, 21 September 1998.

3. Discussion with Ambassador William Walker, Coalition for International Justice, Washington DC, 6 April 1999.

4. Secretary-General's Representative Calls Internally Displaced Persons Hidden Side of Kosovo Tragedy, Statement to the Press, HR/99/29, 16 April 1999, Geneva.

5. Press Statement by the President of the Security Council, 3 June 1999, New York.

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