

Myth and reality: the return of Kosovan Albanians

by Peter Marsden

On 10 June, the day after the signing of the NATO-Yugoslav peace agreement, there were 138,600 refugees living with host families in Macedonia¹ with a further 106,500 refugees living in camps². By early August, 15,000 refugees remained with host families and 5,000 in camps. Of the original eight camps/transit centres, only three remained open. In public statements up until 25 June 1999, UNHCR voiced both its concern that refugees should not return prematurely and also its expectation that, despite warning refugees against an early return, the refugee camps in Macedonia would empty very quickly. The speed of the return over the following days confirmed UNHCR's expectations and gave the impression of an undifferentiated mass response to NATO's entry into Kosovo.

In fact the picture gained from interviewing refugees in the three major refugee camps in Macedonia, Stenkovec 1 and 2 and Cegrane, on 23, 24 and 25 June was quite different. By 22 June there was already a return process underway, exemplified by the presence of private buses and trucks at the entrance to each camp. People were moving to Pristina and to Gjiliane in eastern Kosovo, both of which were known to be reasonably safe. Despite the steady exodus, the camps remained approximately three-quarters full.

In talking to individual families, it was clear that there was a direct correlation between the area of origin and interest in an early return. While those from Pristina and Gjiliane indicated that they would soon be going back, those from areas which were known to be badly damaged or heavily mined stated that they would wait until the international community was in a position to provide support. There was a high level of awareness of the risk of mines. A privately-produced newspaper circulating in the camps gave news of the situation

in Kosovo. On 23 June there was a report of a meeting of NATO governments at which refugees were urged to wait for 100 days to allow mines to be surveyed and human rights atrocities to be investigated. The refugees were approaching the situation in a sober manner and advice given by the international community was thoroughly debated.

There were families reluctant to return because of their vulnerability. Some lacked adult males and were concerned at how they might cope on their return. Those with traumatized children feared for their children's emotional stability if they returned. There were many families with physically or mentally disabled members. Families containing individuals with complex medical conditions were also an important element. Although camp health facilities were not well equipped, the refugees realistically anticipated that health services in Kosovo would be even less adequate. Additionally, a number of Albanians who had been living in Serbia before fleeing to Macedonia felt unable to go back. However, despite this apparent reluctance of a significant number of refugees to contemplate an early return, many of the camps were virtually empty only three days later. What led to this sudden mass exodus?

Evidence suggests that the major factor was concern that others might occupy or loot their properties. There were growing reports of lawlessness in Kosovo and of returnees occupying the homes of neighbours when they found their own damaged. There may, therefore, have been a sudden panic which tipped the balance in favour of an early return to benefit from the summer weather in order to rebuild houses and cultivate land.

Mass departure coincided with an apparent decline in the services provided in the camps in Macedonia. By 25 June standards in Cegrane were giving serious cause for concern and refugees in

Stenkovec 1 were reporting that some food items were no longer available. They were also very unhappy that, as families around them departed, the debris left behind was not collected; they voiced unease at possible health risks to their children and were clearly affected by the visual impact of this accumulating waste. Adverse weather conditions added to feelings of discomfort in the camps and some residents expressed feelings of insecurity as the tents and plots around them emptied.

It is difficult to say to what extent the agencies working in the camps could have avoided this decline in standards. Many were rapidly losing their Albanian Kosovan staff as they, like other camp residents, returned to Pristina to stake their claims to property. Other staff, rightly fearing for their continued employment in the Macedonian camps, were keen to return and apply for jobs created by the arrival of UN agencies and NGOs in Pristina. As the focus shifted to relief and reconstruction in Kosovo it is possible that the maintenance of services in the camps was given relatively low priority - despite the continuing commitment of the agencies involved. With events moving so quickly, it is perhaps unrealistic to expect agencies to have done more than they did.

The key questions that remain are whether the safeguarding of services in the camps should have been given higher priority in the scenario planning of UNHCR, NGOs and donors and whether more determined action would have made any difference to the pace of return. I suspect that it would not. Nevertheless, a profound sense of unease remains that many returned to Kosovo against their better judgement.

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¹ Macedonian Red Cross figures
² UNHCR figures