

Refugees and IDPs in Macedonia: successful returns

by Aleksandar Shumkovski

Recently Macedonia has hosted large numbers of refugees fleeing conflict in former Yugoslavia while also dealing with major internal displacement generated by ethnic conflict.

The Macedonian constitution and national legislation guarantee the right to asylum and provide procedures for refugee determination. Criteria for acquisition of refugee status are in line with the 1951 Convention as well as the 1967 Protocol.

Macedonia has hosted refugees since the early 1990s when 32,000 Bosnians and Croats sought shelter from conflict in the former Yugoslavia. In May 1999 some 360,000 Kosovars sought protection in Macedonia and were offered the status of temporary humanitarian assisted persons (THAPs). NGOs provided free legal aid to Kosovar refugees to assist them in registration and document issuance and worked with UNHCR and IOM to assist those seeking repatriation or third-country resettlement. NGOs also ran campaigns to inform refugees of their rights.

Humanitarian evacuation was initially exercised as a means of reducing the huge number of refugees who arrived in Macedonia. Resettlement to safe third countries was carried out:

- to facilitate family reunification
- to send a refugee to medical treatment abroad (if he or she could not get an appropriate medical treatment in Macedonia)
- to protect a refugee whose physical security is endangered in Macedonia

In 2001 ethnic conflict in Macedonia led to the displacement of some 140,000 people. Ethnic Albanians fled Skopje while Macedonians fled from Tetovo and Aracinovo. A considerable number of houses were damaged or destroyed. There was a danger that the country would split into two ethnic enclaves. Most IDPs sheltered with relatives and had better access to food, hygiene and medical supplies than those forced to live in collective centres. A small number - dubbed 'micro-IDPs' by the American Red Cross - continued to commute to work but did not return to their own homes at night.

After the crisis was resolved by the internationally-brokered Ohrid Framework Agreement signed in August 2001, preconditions were created for the return of IDPs and organised reconstruction of damaged and destroyed property. In April 2003 it was reported that some 137,000 IDPs had gone home, with a further 3,000 still unable to do so due to ongoing security concerns and delays in repair of housing. The Macedonian Red Cross and NGOs have provided humanitarian assistance to IDPs and the Ministry of Health free health services to IDPs. UNHCR and bilateral donors have provided funds, which have enabled returning families to receive financial and material support to rebuild their houses.

UNHCR has played a key role in facilitating IDP returns, building

confidence in the peace process and encouraging a climate of trust and reconciliation. It has promoted freedom of movement in ex-conflict zones by providing bus services, supported psychosocial activities for IDPs, provided winter clothing, firewood and repairing heating systems in collective centres and administered infrastructure projects to restore livelihoods in conflict-affected areas.

The key lessons that can be drawn from Macedonia's success in facilitating the return of significant refugee and IDP populations are that:

- Adequate support must be secured from communities prepared to accept displaced people.
- Neither military action nor humanitarian assistance can substitute for political action to tackle inequities at the heart of conflict.
- Careful planning is needed to ensure successful resettlement.

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