

IDPs from Kosovo still awaiting durable solutions

by Anika Krstic

As the Balkans anxiously await delayed UN recommendations on the final status of the Serbian province of Kosovo, displaced persons from Kosovo remain torn between uncertain return prospects and denial of local integration.

Seven years have passed since NATO forced Serbian security forces to withdraw from Kosovo, Kosovo Albanian refugees returned home and around 250,000 people – mostly but not exclusively Serbs – were displaced into Serbia proper. UN proposals for the future status of the province are now expected after Serbia's parliamentary elections on 21 January 2007.

"The majority of the IDPs and refugees who fled the Kosovo province of Serbia and Montenegro after the ousting of the Yugoslav army and the return of the ethnic Albanian majority in mid 1999 are still in their places of displacement and the situation of the minorities remaining in Kosovo is still precarious ... there is still some 'unfinished business' in the Western Balkans."

UNHCR, November 2006¹

According to UNHCR, there are 207,069 displaced persons from Kosovo in Serbia, 16,284 in Montenegro and 22,000 within Kosovo.² The great majority are Serbs but they also include Roma, Egyptians,³ Ashkali,⁴ Gorani,⁵ Bosniaks, Turks and other smaller groups. They mainly reside in private accommodation, with extended family or friends, while a smaller percentage remain in recognised and unrecognised collective centres. Almost all have to fend for themselves, due to the limited and sometimes erratic assistance provided by the Serbian government and aid agencies. Poverty among IDPs is widespread and their living conditions are generally poor or substandard. There is substantial diversity within the IDP community, depending on their place of origin

in Kosovo and whether they come from urban or rural areas. Forced to be proactive, they have established associations advocating for return to their communities of origin, engaging in inter-ethnic dialogue and liaising with major stakeholders and agencies.

In Serbia, IDPs have the right to social services and healthcare, education, employment, housing, justice and freedom of movement. However, they face serious problems in realising their rights as a result of overly bureaucratic procedures and/or discrimination. Many Albanian-speaking Roma children living in central and northern Serbia are out of school due to the absence of Albanian-medium education.

Many elderly IDPs have not received their full pension entitlements for many years. Large numbers of IDPs lack personal documentation, without which it may be impossible to establish entitlement to benefits and services. Lack of ID also severely restricts the ability of IDPs to find secure jobs and decent accommodation. In some cases, especially in Roma communities, IDPs are unable to obtain a citizenship certificate, rendering them practically stateless within their own country.⁶ The Serbian Commissariat for Refugees – the state agency charged with issuing the cards required to access collective

accommodation and aid programmes – requires IDPs to renew their cards every three months. This greatly curtails their freedom of movement.

After seven years of administering the province, the United Nations Mission in Kosovo (UNMIK)⁷ has signally failed to rebuild a multi-ethnic Kosovo. Ethnic communities have been drawn even further apart. An outbreak of ethnic violence in March 2004 newly displaced some 4,200 people – most of them Serbs but also Roma and Ashkali – and effectively put a halt to the return momentum which had slowly built up in previous years. The clashes marked a step further in the separation of communities and resulted in a serious loss of confidence in the capacity of local authorities and the international community to rebuild a multi-ethnic Kosovo. According to UNHCR "members of ethnic minorities continue to suffer from



'low-scale' ethnically motivated security incidents such as physical and verbal assaults/threats, arson, stoning, intimidation, harassment, looting, and 'high-scale' incidents such as shootings and murders.'⁸

UNHCR reports that 12,700 persons from minority groups have so far returned to Kosovo (6,000 Serbs, 3,300 Egyptians, 1,400 Roma and 1,150 Bosniaks). IDPs from Serbia mostly return to rural areas where they constitute a majority. Urban returns are still lagging hugely behind. The small number of returns is mainly due to the poor security situation (where violent attacks on returnees are commonplace), lack of freedom of movement, bleak economic prospects and the uncertain future status of Kosovo. Displaced people are routinely prevented from recovering their homes or agricultural land, receiving compensation for destroyed property or receiving rent from properties.

In June 2006 a protocol on voluntary and sustainable return was signed between UNMIK, the provisional self-government of Kosovo and the government of Serbia to establish preconditions for sustainable and voluntary return of IDPs to Kosovo.⁹ This document could pave the way for belated reversal of conflict-related population movements but much will depend on its implementation. Much

more needs to be done to establish a secure environment for sustainable return, to guarantee returnees access to services and to promote reintegration. Ethnically-based crimes and incidents must be investigated and avenues for redress established.

Looking ahead

The decision on the final status of Kosovo – originally expected in November 2006 – will undoubtedly have an impact on regional stability. It could either trigger new waves of displacement or provide a framework for the resolution of age-old strife. A creative solution will look for common interests, rather than divisions. No sides should be given any excuses for undermining the return process.

Our experience shows that no equitable solution can be found without a comprehensive dialogue between ethnic communities, using all available fora and procedures. An essential part of the dialogue is the commitment of leaders on all levels to encourage their constituencies to interact. Security, financial support and psychological motivation are vital for sustainable return, as is the participation of minority communities in the negotiations and public administration of Kosovo. For its part, Serbia needs to ensure full

realisation of rights by IDPs during their displacement and facilitation of conditions in which they can reach a free and informed decision on whether to return or integrate.

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1. G Ambroso, 'The Balkans at a crossroads: progress and challenges in finding durable solutions for refugees and displaced persons from the wars in the former Yugoslavia', UNHCR Research Paper No. 133, November 2006, p1 www.unhcr.org/research/RESEARCH/4552f2182.pdf

2. Data as of 31 August 2006 at statistics section, UNHCR Serbia and Montenegro webpage www.unhcr.org.yu/default.aspx

3. An Albanian-speaking minority, formerly associated with the Roma, but now acknowledged as a separate ethnic group.

4. An Albanian-speaking minority, the great majority of whom fled Kosovo to escape persecution after 1999. www.ashkali.org.yu

5. A small Muslim Slavic minority, only half of whom now remain in the mountainous Gora region of southern Kosovo.

6. For more information, see the Serbian Refugee Council report at www.ssi.org.yu/images/stories/SSIREports/AccessToRightsIDPsInSerbiaAnalyticalReportENG.doc

7. www.unmikonline.org/

8. Ambroso, p8

9. www.unhcr.org/cgi-bin/texis/vtx/news/opendoc.htm?tbl=NEWS&id=448991e82