IDPs from Kosovo still awaiting durable solutions

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.

According to UNHCR, there are 207,069 displaced persons from Kosovo in Serbia, 16,284 in Montenegro and 22,000 within Kosovo. The great majority are Serbs but they also include Roma, Egyptians, Ashkali, Gorani, 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. 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) has signal 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
Out of Africa: misrepresenting Sudan’s ‘Lost Boys’

The US media has taken an intense interest in the experience of a relatively small group of young males who walked from South Sudan to Ethiopia, spent up to a decade in the Kakuma refugee camp in Kenya and were eventually re-settled in the USA in 2001. What is behind the celebrity status – and the cultural misunderstanding – of those dubbed the ‘Lost Boys’?

While working for a programme to integrate the ‘Lost Boys’ in Syracuse, New York state, I became aware that there are significant discrepancies between typical media narration of their collective experience and the recollections of individuals. Glib articles have focused onaloneness, resilience and wandering and ignored the key questions such as: how did a large number of male – but hardly any female – adolescents become separated from their families and survive a traumatic experience apparently unaided?

Host-country media constructions of migrants and refugees shape the way they are received. US print media, the Internet and church groups have endlessly retold and reshaped their