

ALBANIA

REFUGEE INFLUX FROM KOSOVO

16 December 1998

appeal no. 17/98

situation report no. 08/98

period covered: 1 November to 30 November 1998

The conflict in southwest Kosovo has resulted in the mass movement of a total of some 24,500 Kosovo refugees to Albania. The Appeal issued by the Federation on behalf of the Albanian Red Cross (ARC) received a strong response, and assistance activities continue. The ARC and the Federation have made efforts to secure supply pipelines before the onset of winter, and to resolve issues of security for refugees in the northern District of Tropoje. With increasing numbers of beneficiaries, ongoing donor support for this programme is essential.

The context

On 29 May, 1998 heavy fighting broke out in southwest Kosovo, particularly around the towns of Decani and Djakovica, provoking a mass movement of the majority ethnic Albanian population. Over the course of the next few days, some 8,000 people arrived in the northern region of Tropoje - one of the poorest in Albania. Following further influxes during the autumn, unofficial estimates now put the total number of refugees who have entered Albania at approximately 24,500.

Immediately following the initial influx of refugees in June, the Albanian Red Cross (ARC), with the support of the International Federation, distributed relief items from pre-placed stocks in Tirana. Following an assessment mission, the Federation launched an emergency appeal on 11 June seeking CHF 3,223,000 on behalf of the ARC to fund a relief operation to meet the basic food and hygiene needs of 10,000 people for four months until 31 October. On 28 August a revised appeal was launched, seeking an additional CHF 1,556,000 to support 15,000 beneficiaries for two more months until the end of December.

Latest events

On 22 November, a referendum on the draft of the new constitution was held. Despite predictions of unrest, conditions remained generally calm during the period, possibly as a result of very poor weather conditions. The result of the referendum was announced on Friday, 27 November. Of the 1.9 million people registered and eligible to vote, there was a 50.57% turn out, with 93.5% voting in favour of the new constitution which was signed into law by the President on November 28.

A number of violent incidents were reported during the month, including a car bomb explosion in Tirana on 10 November, the bombing of the apartment of a judge of the constitutional court, and a terrorist attack carried out against the electricity network south of Tirana, reducing the supply to the south of the country. Further incidents involving armed gangs also took place in Shkodra on 10 November. However, joint Italian and Albanian police activity against refugee smugglers in the south of the country have been so successful that the trade has switched its emphasis back to the small northern port of Shengen.

The Albanian government is preparing for a high demand on electricity supplies this winter and is considering cutting the tax rate on kerosene to try to stimulate its use for heating and hence reduce the overall demand for electricity. Current estimates suggest that demand will be as much as 30% above capacity.

The Office for Refugees failed to keep its promise to reregister all refugees in the Tropoje district by the end of October. No re-registration has to date been attempted in any location other than Bajram Curri. Subjective investigation of the lists provided for Bajram Curri indicate that they may be inaccurate by as much as 25%. Re-registration of all refugees is now planned for December, although the Office for Refugees believes that it will be unable to complete the process before January 1999.

Official figures published by the Office for Refugees of the Government

District	No. of Refugees
Tropoje	3,000
Durres	7,000
Tirana	6,500
Fier	297
Shkodra	2,680
Kukes	130
Elbasan	154
Lezhe	648
Has	830
Kavaje	200

No major change was witnessed in the number of people from Kosovo entering or leaving the Former Yugoslav Republic (FYR) Macedonia during the month, although some cases of returns to non-conflict areas have been reported. Following the November elections, the newly elected government in FYR Macedonia was expected to be in place by the beginning of December. A centre right coalition (VMRO/DA) with an outright majority is expected to combine with an Albanian party (DPA) to govern the country, with all three parties having ministers in the cabinet. Following the government's notification of "humanitarian assisted" status for persons from Kosovo temporarily

residing in the country, around 600 persons have signed up, 20% less than those who have received aid from the Red Cross programme. The difference is assumed to be those persons without legal status but who are considered by the Red Cross to be vulnerable.

According to UNHCR, the number of refugees from Kosovo in collective centres in Bosnia and Herzegovina remains at approximately 1,500 - with two thirds of these accommodated in the Hadzici/Coca-Cola factory on the outskirts of Sarajevo.

Red Cross/Red Crescent action

In the light of heightened security concerns in the northern district of Tropoje, the ARC and Federation agreed to suspend distribution in this district in November. This decision was communicated to UNHCR and subsequently the government. The Federation continues to press UNHCR for a solution to the security of the remaining refugees in the area before the onset of winter. Some collective accommodation is now becoming available. UNHCR moved 40 refugees to collective accommodation in Valipolje by the end of the month, and paid the expenses of a further 170 who moved to Tirana and Durres.

Distribution was made in November to a total of 12,467 beneficiaries in 10 districts. Severe winter weather conditions hampered distribution in the Has and Kukes districts, although Red Cross trucks managed to reach the districts by the end of the month. The ARC and Federation were also able to react swiftly to the sudden withdrawal of Balkan Aid from Lezhe, which had been supporting some 400 beneficiaries a month through a soup kitchen.

Items distributed from 1 to 30 November 1998 (Albania)

Commodity	Quantity
Food parcels	10,626
ECHO tinned chicken	24,934 tins
Stoves	2,065 units
Hygiene items	10,265 items
Washing powder	15,345 kg
Winter clothes	506 bales

Although the number of persons from Kosovo leaving or entering FYR Macedonia did not change dramatically during the month, the number approaching the Red Cross for assistance did. Between the UNHCR and the Red Cross, nearly 500 persons were assisted with food, hygiene, bedding, medical care, medicines or legal residency help. Of this total, 416 received aid directly from the Red Cross, which represents an increase of almost 100% on October figures. This increase can be explained by increasing vulnerability amongst the visitors as family savings are used up and host family resources are stretched to the limit. Used clothing donated by Swedish Red Cross is being distributed through all Red Cross branches and collective centres in the country to beneficiaries from Kosovo, Bosnian refugees and local social cases. The National Society and the Federation are also working together with the Catholic Relief Society to provide firewood for the winter to as many beneficiaries as possible. A contribution from the British Red Cross is supporting this programme.

Distributed during November 1998 (FYR Macedonia)

Commodity	Quantity
Flour	1,030 kg
Beans	412 kg
Sugar	206 kg
Oil	206 litres
Baby food	63 pcs

Soap	209 pcs
Mattresses	346 pcs
Blankets	602 pcs
Towels	353 pcs
Shampoo	203 pcs
Toothpaste	209 pcs

As of 1 December, the Red Cross of the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina has begun to implement a new programme of assistance to refugees from Kosovo. Red Cross staff will coordinate all distributions to beneficiaries, employing a distribution manager and utilising a vehicle provided by the International Federation for a period of six months. A Memorandum of Understanding was expected to be signed between the Red Cross, local authorities, and UNHCR to formalise the responsibilities of each party involved. The Swedish Red Cross have forwarded clothing for babies to be distributed within the programme.

Outstanding needs

Urgent steps need to be taken to secure an adequate pipeline of relief items to Albania for the early part of 1999. Registration continues to be an issue of concern to the Federation in Albania, as does the security situation in the northern district of Tropoje, where Red Cross distributions have been suspended. In FYR Macedonia, UNHCR is restocking depleted Red Cross blanket supplies, although the other programme elements can be maintained at present levels until the end of the year.

External relations - Government/UN/NGOs/Media

The ARC and the Federation continue to maintain close contact with other international agencies, including ICRC, UNHCR and WFP. Following a meeting between the Federation, the ARC, and Prime Minister Maiko at the beginning of November, the Albanian government announced to UNHCR that it intended to bring all refugees out of the Tropoje district. The ARC and the Federation continue to highlight the problems of registration and the lack of collective accommodation with UNHCR and the need for urgent solutions. Effective coordination continues with UNHCR in FYR Macedonia on responding to the range of needs of the most vulnerable persons from Kosovo.

Contributions

See Annex 1 for details.

Conclusion

Despite re-registration and security concerns in Tropoje, the programme of assistance in Albania is running well. Concerns have however been raised regarding the overall number of refugees to be served by all agencies. The target figure of 15,000 beneficiaries for the Red Cross programmes is being constantly reviewed in the light of other agency input. The Federation urges its donors to support the programme by securing an adequate pipeline of relief items over the winter months. The challenge facing the government and UNHCR remains to provide adequate provision for the majority of refugees remaining in Tropoje (approximately 1,000) who have indicated their readiness to move to other safe, more accessible locations.

In the FYR Macedonia, the Red Cross maintains the lead in developing a system for identifying vulnerable groups within the population from Kosovo. While maintaining assistance to this group of beneficiaries, the Red Cross is ready to act if the situation evolves.

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