

Aid Convoy to Kosovo, Easter 2005

Eight 7½ ton trucks (I was co-driving one of them), two 38 tonners and an ambulance (to be donated) left England and travelled 2½ thousand km through 8 countries over four days to reach the beleaguered and often forgotten country of Kosovo, carrying around 80 tons of humanitarian aid.



Stuck at the border



Kosovo became a province of the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia after the 2nd World War. Violence erupted in 1998 following the earlier breakdown of the Republic. The Kosovo Liberation Army came out in open rebellion against Serbian rule. Although the conflict lasted only 78 days, it left thousands of people dead, and displaced over 500,000.

Kosovo / Kosova (it depends whether you are Serb or Albanian) is still recovering from the impact of the conflict. Even now families continue to live in extreme poverty and in damaged or partially reconstructed homes and many schools are in a state of disrepair. 60% of the population are children and young adults; half the population live below the poverty line; 50% of the working age population are unemployed. There is still a lot of hostility between some ethnic groups and a very heavy UN forces presence, also UNHCR and other agencies and NGOs.



Hope and Aid Direct aims to deliver aid directly to the most vulnerable rather than leaving it to local agencies to distribute, although we work closely with local groups and charities, such as UNHCR, the Red Cross, and especially on this occasion, the Mother Theresa Foundation, who helped us to identify the families most in need and provided us with local interpreters and guides and a warehouse to use for distribution. The families were identified purely by need, not ethnic group.

Our arrival was delayed for many hours by bureaucratic hold-ups on the Serbian and Kosovan borders, despite having obtained paperwork to smooth our passage from the Serbian Embassy in London, which meant we had to work even harder over a shorter period of time to distribute all the aid. Our first day in Pristina, the capital, where we were based, was spent unpacking all the trucks and sorting the warehouse so the smaller trucks could be repacked each day.



Every day we got up early, packed our trucks in the warehouse, and together with a guide/interpreter, each truck drove to the designated delivery point, often in very remote regions of the country and taking up to 4 hours to reach, delivering to individual families in the main, but also to various projects including children's homes, schools, and hospitals. Over five days aid was delivered to 1912 families; 9527 people, as well as to the projects. My own personal itinerary was as follows:

On the first day we drove 80 km to a displaced persons' camp near Gjakova in the west of Kosovo, comprising 24 families, which dated from before the war in 1998/9. The camp was rudimentary, but very clean and tidy, in contrast to most of Kosovo which is full of litter due to the lack of infrastructure for refuse disposal. We were invited into one house where a woman lived with seven other members of her family in one room in a wooden shack, with the roof falling down in places, and with hardly any possessions. To these families we delivered food, men's, women's and children's clothes, shoes, toiletries, blankets, bedding and household items, baby equipment, toys and some gardening tools.



Our second drop was nearby to another displaced person's camp at Graniti, this time dating from the war. Thirty families lived in very basic concrete blocks. By the time we got around to distributing the toys and sweets we were swamped by small eager children!

On the second day we travelled about the same distance again, southwards, to Strpce, to a valley up in the mountains on the border with Macedonia and to a collective centre run by the OSCE Mission in Kosovo. We were also helped by a UN volunteer from Germany. A representative from each family had come to the collective to receive the aid, and we talked to them through an interpreter about how the aid was collected, how many people back in Britain were involved and how far we had driven, and assured them that they were not forgotten. Most of the people were Serbs – many Serbs remaining in Kosovo feel threatened and isolated and this area is a kind of enclave known as Serb valley – and a few Roma – who have tended to be persecuted by both Serbs and Albanians and are often the most needy. We asked to see a family in their house and were driven in a UNHCR 4-wheel drive to visit a Roma family in their "house". Words fail me to describe the conditions under which these people were living and tears come to my eyes just thinking about it. We met a very young mother with two beautiful babies sharing a small room or hut with 4 other family members and not even a mattress to sleep on, just some lumps of old tatty foam kept together with a cloth over them. They have no work. The UN volunteer said it was the worst conditions he had seen and said he would try to get more help to the Roma families in this valley. Unfortunately I have no photos as I lost a film when our truck was broken into later in the week.

On the third day we drove southwards again to Prizren, from where we had three drops at Suhareke and Rahovec and a guide but no interpreter, and we drove a long way up mountains and the most dreadful roads full of potholes and land mine holes, driving in first gear for long periods. Photos from these three drops are also lost which is upsetting, but I hope to retrieve some from others who were there.

The third drop was the most memorable and moving. As we had no interpreter we did not immediately grasp the significance of the fact that only women had turned up at the collective centre to collect the aid, until we understood that all 24 women had lost their husbands on the same day six years ago; they were taken away and shot, although some are still classified as "missing". And how appropriate for us to turn up on the anniversary. Of course there were no children under six. One of the women took us to see her "office" in the collective centre where she worked to track down and identify the "missing", and showed us hundreds of heart-rending photographs of the missing men and some of bodies. The village was reduced from over 600 people to less than 200 in one day. It was dark by the time we were driving back on these treacherous roads.

Later we came across the wall of the missing in the middle of Pristina – row upon row of photographs of men and boys, and a few women. Whole families were wiped out – we found 11 members of the same family in one case. The youngest we found was 14.



Day four was one of happier stories; we visited two children's homes in Pristina. The first was a home built and run by the German charity SOS Kinderdorf, looking after abandoned babies. The home was pristine and the babies obviously lovingly cared for, but they told us they are still short of many things unavailable locally, such as nappies. They told us they are usually able to find foster homes for the babies. <http://www.sos-childrensvillages.org>

Then we visited a house run by the charity Hope and Homes for Children (<http://www.hopeandhomes.org/kosovo.htm>) managed by an energetic and inspirational English woman called Jacqui. Here a warm and loving family home is provided for vulnerable children, who might be orphans, or have been abused or in prostitution. They try hard to achieve reconciliation and reunite children with their families where possible, Another member of the convoy had visited last year and noted the progress, including two new rooms built from enclosing two balconies with the aid of volunteers from the Isle of Wight, and very creative use of the carpet tiles brought by the convoy last year. We left lots of aid here, including toys, exercise books and Easter eggs, and then went to visit their new house, about to be opened, which will provide semi-independent living for over-sixteens, including helping them to get training or apprenticeships in such things as hairdressing, tailoring and car mechanics. Here among other things we delivered some bales of material and a sewing machine, hairdressing supplies and bedding. Their most pressing need was for beds so we gave them money to buy the first three. I have since heard from Jacqui by email that they are about to buy the beds and the first three young adults are about to move in. They still need many things to make these houses homely and comfortable (see the attached "wish" list!)

On our last day we visited a school at Mogilla, south east from Pristina, one of three linked schools in the area. At Mogilla there are 116 children between 5 and 8, in four classes. Most are Albanian although Serbs and Albanians are taught together which gives one some hope

for the future. The school at Pogorci is a nursery school, with 135 children under five, 25 of whom are Serbs. I am not sure about the third school at Verbofci as our 14 year old interpreter's English was not very advanced, although she tried her very best. Unfortunately as it was Easter we did not meet any of the children, but we met the Director who looks after all 3 schools. All children attend school for only 3 hours a day, either morning or afternoon, due to teacher shortages. The school at Mogilla is fairly new, built with American funds, but is very bare and short of very basic materials. One classroom has some reasonable tables and chairs but the others have very old desks which are unsuitable for putting together for group work etc. There is also a room called the Library but which lacks both bookshelves and books! Another wish list follows. I hope to revisit the school/s in September taking some of the things they need, and to see the school in operation and meet some of the children.



One of the 4 classrooms at Mogilla



The Library

All too soon it was time to leave and for the long drive home; all the harder because the adrenalin was fading. Final log was over 6000 km driven.

See the website for more information about the convoy and the work of the charity:
<http://www.hopeandaiddirect.org.uk>.

A huge thank you to everyone who contributed time money and aid for this convoy. Now you can do even more! What we took felt like a small drop in a very large ocean when we got to Kosovo so it is not too early to start raising aid for the convoy in September.

What you can do:

Fundraising – around £4000 is needed to take a truck (including hire, insurance, ferry, road tolls and taxes, spedition fees), which means that each driver had to raise at least £2000. Can you help me to run a fundraising event? Would you like me to come and talk and show photos and a video of last Easter's convoy?

Storage – do you have an empty garage or similar we could use to store aid until September?

Use your contacts – to obtain such things as bulk food, computers, furniture, etc etc – see the wish lists that follow

Join the convoy – if you are able to raise money and aid; also if you have building, mechanical, plumbing, electrical skills – some of our projects could use you

Collect aid – see the wish lists that follow

If you can help an any way, please contact Hilary Webb (01483 689605 – work, 870727 – home, h.webb@surrey.ac.uk)

Thank you

Hilary

WISH LISTS (see also <http://www.hopeandaiddirect.org.uk/Wish.htm>)

General aid for families

Blankets and bedding, towels
Children's clothes, baby clothes and equipment
All practical household items
Garden and other tools
Dried food

Hope and Homes for Children

Bedding, curtains, furniture, mirrors, bedside lamps etc to equip bedrooms
Hairdressing equipment
Fabric and sewing equipment, sewing machines
Car mechanic tools

Schools Project

Bookshelves
Desks, tables and chairs, including small for kindergarten
Screen and projector
Notice boards
Sports equipment, table tennis, football, basketball
Computer and video player
Art equipment and materials
Playground equipment, playhouse, slide
Musical instruments

Hospitals and Health Centres

Sheets and bedding
Medical supplies
Wheelchairs, zimmer frames, walking sticks, etc
Another ambulance

General

Cheap truck hire

If you can help in any way, please contact Hilary Webb (01483 689605 – work, 870727 – home, h.webb@surrey.ac.uk)

Thank you

Hilary