



Forgotten People **Kosovo, March 2005**

Report by Bev Gadsdon, 20th April 2005

On special leave from War Child to undertake voluntary work with Hope and Aid Direct
(www.hopeandaiddirect.org.uk)

BACKGROUND –

Hope and Aid Direct

Hope and Aid Direct was established in 1999. It's founders had undertaken previous trips to the Balkans with the charity 'Convoy of Hope' but started up on their own, to mould a charity that would help all persons in need, despite their ethnicity and location, and to give aid directly to those in need, rather than leaving it in a warehouse for later distribution.

Hope and Aid Direct's current work is, on the whole, immediate humanitarian aid relief; the charity gives aid to those in greatest need that cannot afford to buy things, or require help to improve their lives, however, some of the work is sustainable in that the charity also takes items that the people cannot obtain in country, or items to finish off previously started projects. For example a year ago we were asked to visit a school. It was beautiful from the outside and had been constructed by USAID two years prior to our visit. But inside they had nothing and therefore the building stood empty. We provided school equipment, stationary, and musical instruments in order to encourage children to attend the school. Teachers were willing to volunteer their time even though no wage could be paid.

Hope and Aid Direct is currently looking at a nutrition programme to try and improve the diet of those in greatest poverty, and a baking project to provide free food to those in need and provide employment for the locals, thus boosting the economy. This latter project is dependent on partner organisations that have already shown an interest in committing to the project.

Our Easter 2005 mission to Kosovo was Hope and Aid Direct's eighth trip back there. Previous convoys have included Bosnia, Croatia and Serbia. The charity has also helped to get a container of aid sent to Zambia to help schools there, and a container of food was sent immediately after the Tsunami struck earlier this year to Sri Lanka.

As everyone involved is a volunteer, missions to Kosovo are limited to two convoys per year, however, additional trips are undertaken for particular projects if needed and constant planning for the next trip begins pretty much as soon as we return again to England.

In country, Hope and Aid Direct works with both local and international Non Governmental Organisations (NGOs); these are our partners for the work which is undertaken, and they provide sponsorship and support letters which are required to enter the country. Hope and Aid Direct's partners on the ground work with vulnerable people and have documented lists of families who require help and also institutions which need assistance. Prior to each trip, our partners provide us with a 'wish list'. This is circulated amongst the team and each crew (i.e. 2/3 persons to a lorry) works to obtain items on the list which are needed in country and which will be most beneficial to our recipients; past convoys have included the transportation of a complete dental surgery, various items of medical equipment to include ultra-sound machines, incubation units, and specialist equipment for the handicapped, tables, chairs, and rolling blackboards to fit out classrooms in schools, and on this last trip an Ambulance for a town that couldn't afford one.

In addition, our normal and basic food stuffs are collected, together with toiletries, sanitary items, bedding, clothing, household equipment, tools which are used for household and Collective Centre drops.



Kosovo

Prior to 1991, the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (FRY) was made up of six constituent republics (Serbia, Montenegro, Macedonia, Croatia, Slovenia and Bosnia & Herzegovina and two autonomous provinces of Serbia and Vojvodina (Kosovo was an autonomous province of Serbia). Kosovo had similar rights to the republics, despite the fact that it was part of the Republic of Serbia.

As Yugoslavia broke apart, the international community recognised only the claims to statehood from the actual republics, thus not including Kosovo. Years of rising tensions between a majority ethnic Albanian population and minority Serbs led to armed resistance by early 1998. Battles between Kosovo Liberation Army (UCK) guerrillas and Serb police forces claimed a steadily growing death toll. The pressure on the international community to take action grew, and a NATO cease-fire was negotiated in October 1998 and Yugoslavia was forced under pressure to partially withdraw its forces from Kosovo.

Fighting continued as Serbs sought to re-establish control over its territory. An alleged massacre by Serb security forces in the village of Racak in January 1999 prompted NATO intervention. Talks took place at Rabouillet in France and NATO launched air strikes against Yugoslavia in order to drive Serbs from Kosovo. Air strikes began on the 24 March and led to massive displacement of Kosovo Albanians and a humanitarian emergency. It was expected to last three days, but instead lasted eleven weeks. During this time over 450,000 fled to Albania and 400,000 people fled to Macedonia.

In June 1999 the province was placed under the authority of the United Nations Interim Mission in Kosovo (UNMIK). The arrival of NATO troops led to Serbian withdrawal.



Those who returned to Kosovo found abandoned villages, looted homes and businesses, and burnt out shells of buildings. The people were often highly traumatised by not only months of violence, but decades of oppression and discrimination that they had endured under Serbian rule. The rapid return of the refugees caused its own humanitarian and security problems, resulting in pressures for shelter and food. The returning Albanians killed a significant number of Serbs and Roma and other minorities who were accused of Serb collaboration, having remained in Kosovo. Looting, arson, forced expulsion, killing and abduction became a daily occurrence.¹

The Current Situation in Kosovo

“15% of the population (c 300,000) survive on no more than bread and tea/water²”.

The situation in Kosovo is not encouraging. Although many new buildings have been constructed, there is a huge unemployment problem, lack of inward economic investment, on-going ethnic divide, and enormous poverty. There are 85 Collective Centres with people living in appalling conditions, and there are many thousands of Roma who receive no official help; for many there is little or no hope!

The divide between Albanians, Serbs and Roma is still hugely apparent. All aspects of the Serbs' lives are problematic – including freedom of movement, employment opportunities, property rights, access to education, healthcare and justice. The Serbs however are in a stronger position than the Roma, Ashkalia or Gorani as they do have backing from neighbouring Serbia and have, at least in Northern Kosovo, the capacity to organise themselves into a credible political force. Movement outside of Serb enclaves is dependent on KFOR armed escorts.



On 17th and 18th March 2004, ethnic violence broke out between Serbs, Albanians and Roma; 4000 people were made homeless, and 17 people lost their lives.

¹ HRW Report 10 (D), 1999 “Abuses Against Serbs and Roma in the New Kosovo” & OSCE H.R. Report “As Seen As Told”.

² Doctor Luli, UMCOR, 2004

In mixed, semi-urban areas such as Obilic, where people are forced to go out to work or shop unescorted, they continue to be primary targets for violent, ethnically motivated attacks.

This divide spills over into education. In mixed areas where Serbian children are given the opportunity to attend school, the two ethnic groups are strictly divided and do not mix. The Serbs will attend one sitting and the Albanians another.

[In the predominantly Albanian area of Pristina the Capital, there are three sittings at the School, as there are not enough schools to cater for all the children. Each sitting of 1000 children provides 4 hours of education. A typical day at school starts at 7am and finishes at 7pm. The average wage for a teacher is 120 Euros per month.]

Roma IDPs are especially vulnerable and live in dreadful conditions. The magnitude of the Roma 'problem' is often hidden as many do not register with local authorities. Their marginalised position limits their access to health, education and employment. They tend to face legal obstacles in obtaining basic documents, which also hampers their access to humanitarian assistance.



Many livelihoods systems are based on individual agricultural production of fruit trees, staple foods (carbohydrates), vegetables, some animals (providing milk and house production of cheese). The only commodities which are regularly purchased are oil, salt and sugar. However, following the war many people have been forced to move from their rural homelands into urban areas or IDP camps without access to their usual livelihood systems. In many rural areas animals were killed during the war, hence a big effect on people's livelihoods, with the result that certain foods are no longer available.

There is only one Power Station in Kosovo, situated on the outskirts of Obilic, and the pollution hangs, and falls over Plementina Camp (a huge Roma camp [approximately 500 people]– 300 meters away). Other sources of power come directly from Serbia. It is very common for electricity to be off for a short period of time, every two hours. IWPR (07/04) reported that in Pristina, water goes off for 7 hours every night and electricity fails regularly, on the day of the IRIN interview it had been off for 18 hours (Balkan Crisis Report 509).

Many restaurants and hotels have generators. However, hospitals, such as the one based in North Mitrovica cannot afford a generator, and consequently what are already life-threatening medical operations, become dangerously interrupted on a regular basis.

Some official statistics:-

- The population is between 1.7 million and 2.4 million (IRIN)
- Official unemployment stats vary, but last November we were told by an official that it was 40%. IRIN statistics are more severe; they state that the working age population is 1 million, yet those employed number only 325,000 (13.5%) and if those who work their own land in subsistence farming are excluded, the total number employed is just 147,000 i.e. just 6.1% of the population.
- 40% of the population i.e. say 700,000 are in 'extreme poverty' and 'at risk' (UNICEF)
- 15% of the population (c 300,000) survive on no more than bread and tea/water – [Dr Luli Maloku of UMCOR]
- Social assistance payments were made in October 2004 to only 184,508 individuals, and even then payments were for only 40 to 60 Euros for a month for an entire family, the majority of which have more than 5 family members [Dept of Social Welfare]
- Many thousands of individuals do not receive any help at all because "for very minor reasons, they do not meet official criteria" – quote by the Director of Ministry of Social Welfare
- Kosovo has one of the highest birth rates in Europe, estimated at 21.6 per thousand. Infant mortality is estimated at 35 per 1,000 live births and a maternal mortality ratio at 153 per 100,000 live births (UNICEF, 2002)
- 3,000 people are still classified as 'missing' from the 1999 War (ReliefWeb, 01/05)

Mission, March 18th – April 2nd 2005

Eight 7 ½ ton trucks, two 38 tonne articulated lorries and one ambulance left the UK on Friday 18th March and arrived in Kosovo on Tuesday 22nd March, after minor delays in Serbia and clearance of customs at Nis, in Serbia (approximately 1800 miles). There were 25 volunteers in total (three were airborne) and on arrival in Kosovo, all lorries were sent to a compound as they were required to clear customs yet again in Pristina. (The vehicles have to clear customs in Nis, as the Authorities have experienced previous incidents of loads being interfered with in Serbia and also (apparently!) the transportation of arms by NGOs.) In Pristina, we were required to clear customs again, so that UNMIK would have knowledge of what was entering the country and what was being given out. In theory, all distribution lists should tally with the Manifests for our loads that are given to the Customs Authorities when entering the Country. The recipient lists are prepared by our partners and recipients are required to sign for what they receive. The lists are then sent back to UNMIK Customs, presumably for comparison.

80 tonnes of aid was unloaded into a temporary warehouse just on the outskirts of Pristina, and each lorry, excluding the two 38's and the Ambulance was then loaded with specific items which were required for the drops they would make the next day. Each evening, the Lorries were reloaded, with goods for the following days drop.

Distributions took place from Thursday – Monday of the following week, to a total of 1,912 families, comprising approximately 9,500 people. Hope and Aid Direct visited 17 districts, and worked from 60 distribution points in the Southern Kosovo regions of Peja, Gjakove, Istogu, Kline, Viti, Kamenicë, Novobrda, Ferizaj, Kaçanik, Mallshevë, Rahovec, Suhareka, Dragash, Magura, Decani, Prizren, Shtpce and Gjiiane. Help was given to Albanians, Serbs, Roma, Ashkalia, Croats, Gorani and Turks.



Distributions were also made to Hospitals, Handicapped Centres (Handikos), Podgorc School, the charities – Balkan Sunflowers, Hope and Homes, Humanikos, and SOS Kinderdorf, ‘wish list’ items to Dale Samuels the Community Police Officer in Vushtrii, and Bob Charmbury, the UN Administrator in Gjakove, both of whom are undertaking specific projects in these municipalities and would distribute the aid as needed; their loads included sewing machines for an income generation project, football kits, footballs to schools and community centres to enable the children to play football in some sort of team strip, bicycles for Road Safety Programmes, and Wheelchairs for the disabled.

The Ambulance was delivered to the Serbian enclave of Babin Most, after it had first been filled with other medical items that were considered suitable.

Extra deliveries were made to the 3 Collective Centres in Skenderaj – (please see case study to follow.)

Hope and Aid Directs’ partner organisations on this occasion were Mother Theresa Society and United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR).

Some Specific Case Studies:

1) Skenderaj Collective Centre:

Around 60kms from Pristina in north-central Kosovo is the small municipality of Skenderaj.

In the town are three Collective Centres, which, following the 1999 war, are utilised to accommodate Internally Displaced and homeless families. These Centres were intended to be a temporary measure, however six years on; they are still full of families that have no other options.

None of the residents (Albanians) are able to work, and all receive the standard €40 per family per month from the government – regardless of the number of family members.

All three centres are in a very poor state of repair, with broken roof tiles and windows, no heating or hot water and very basic toilet facilities. One building was previously a toy factory and now has 16 families living in what were the offices suites. Another building was a police station prior to the war.



The building shown above is in a very poor condition; dangerous floors that sag badly when walked on with large gaping holes, and a cellar, deep in raw sewerage. Volunteers were appalled by the conditions that 70 people including children and old people were living in. After a meeting with the local authority it was clear that the authority had allocated no money in this year's budget to relocate these unfortunate people or indeed to rectify any of the dangerous and health threatening faults.

Hope and Aid Direct volunteers fitted a communal sink and hot water heater, and repaired the worst of the floors, in addition to supplying each family at each Centre with a family box. Despite this work, the building remains in an unacceptable condition; the local authority could not even commit to pumping out the sewerage and fixing the drains saying "the building is too dangerous for engineers to work in".

In September 2005, Hope and Aid Direct plan to transport a 'portakabin' toilet facility to Kosovo and install this next to the building – whilst this will not resolve their problems – it will show them that they are not forgotten and someone cares.

Advocacy on their behalf continues in Kosovo, and is also being pushed by Hope and Aid Direct in the UK, and will continue again during our next convoy this September.



One man, his wife and two young children had been living in a tent for the last five years and had various health problems as a result. They had moved into the decrepit Collective Centre three months ago. They had no possessions at all. When they moved in they were told by other residents that a group of English people visited them twice a year and brought food, clothes, toys and lots of other things. He said that he didn't believe it, until he saw it with his own eyes”.

2) Hope and Homes, Pristina

<http://www.hopeandhomes.org/kosovo.htm>

Hope and Aid Direct has been working with Hope and Homes in Pristina since its second visit in 2001. This was the first orphanage to set up in Kosovo following the war and was much needed because of the rape victims who did not wish to care for their babies. It is only in recent years that adoption has started to take place in Kosovo. The home now caters for children who are orphans, or have been abused or in prostitution. Hope and Homes try hard to achieve reconciliation and reunite children with their families where possible.

During this visit, we took specific ‘wish list’ items to the Home as requested and then visited their new house, about to be opened, which will provide semi-independent living for over-sixteen’s, including helping them to get training or apprenticeships with providing certain skills, i.e. hairdressing, seamstress skills and car mechanics. In order to help this initiative Hope and Aid Direct also delivered some bales of material, sewing machines and hairdressing supplies as well as bedding. Their most pressing need was for beds, so volunteers gave money in order to buy the first three. The first three adults have now moved in. The hairdressing supplies were brought over destined for the women at Lipyan Prison. Hope and Aid Direct had previously worked at the prison and provided a hairdressing salon which had been installed at the prison in order to give the women some skills and recreational facilities. Some of these goods were diverted to Hope and Homes.

3) Collective Centres, North Mitrovica

Since the conflict in 1999, the town has been divided along the Ibër River. To the south the population are predominantly Kosovo Albanian. Almost all of the 300 Serb families who used to live there have moved north. Those who remain, live under 24-hour KFOR protection in the vicinity of the Serbian Orthodox Church. The north now accommodates approximately 15,000 Serbs, some are IDPs. This is probably the only surviving living strong hold area of Serbian urban life in the whole of Kosovo. Bosniacs and Roma also live in Mitrovica on both sides of the river

There is extensive unemployment in the area, due to the closure of Trepça Mine and Lead smelting plant, looting, destruction of local factories, and an influx of IDPs.

Hope and Aid Direct visited three Collective Centres comprising approximately 50 families in total. We had been to one before on a previous trip and it was distressing to see that the situation for the 27 families living there had not improved, and if anything had worsened. These families live in rooms approximately 3m² despite the number of family members, and they all use shared sanitation facilities.

The rooms contain small wood burning oven rings on which they cook, but they have no refrigeration and no divides for food preparation or sleeping accommodation.



On this occasion we went with an Albanian, who did not speak English, consequently we had to ‘find’ an interpreter. Luckily, Besim, a young man was to hand. He lived at the Centre, but was well dressed and street-wise. He had previously worked for an International NGO (INGO) in Mitrovica and volunteered to help us for the entire day. Each family was given an identical family package of aid, and then we moved on to the next Collective Centre. Besim, who had learnt his English by listening to ‘rap’ music, refused any aid, saying that the others needed it more than him, yet he lived in the same appalling conditions that they did! His caring was extremely humbling!

4) Mitrovica Hospital, North Mitrovica

The building is extremely run down and is the only hospital in Kosovo which caters for the Serb community. Serbs wishing to go from other parts of Kosovo, or needing urgent treatment, have to run a gauntlet of fear, often through, or close to Albanian controlled areas, in order to get the most basic of treatment. At the Hospital, bullet holes remain in the walls from the 1999 conflict and as a result of last March’s clashes. One of our convoy’s crew, herself a Doctor, has previously noted that much of the equipment in the hospital appears to have been donated, and was very old. The drugs cupboard had a small supply of outdated drugs and bed linen was well worn; uniforms for staff were non-existent.

The patients were friendly and eager to talk. They found travelling to the hospital extremely difficult and many had remained for months and even years for treatment, unable to get home or make repeat visits for outpatient treatment. Candles were in common use due to the frequent power failures, and water supplies were unreliable. This year we took equipment which had been requested, as well as two computers so that they can improve their administration within the hospital.