

Kosovo, March 2002

The Hope and Aid Direct Easter convoy arrived back safely on Saturday 6 April 2002.

At the invitation of the ICMC (International Catholic Migration Commission) and with the help of UNMIK (United Nations Interim Mission in Kosovo) and the Kosovo Prison Service, nine 7.5 ton lorries and one 38 ton lorry had crossed Belgium, Austria, Slovenia, Croatia, Bosnia, Montenegro to Kosovo with humanitarian aid and returned after a round trip of 3,500 miles taking 14 days.

There were several incidents on the journey. A clutch failure on one of the Welsh trucks in Zadar, Croatia which took a day to replace. A fuel problem on one of the Southampton trucks took a half a day. A smashed wing mirror occurred while negotiating a steep ascent in Dubrovnik with an overhanging cliff. A three hour delay between Montenegro and Kosovo while snow ploughs cleared the 6,000 ft pass for our night time crossing.

Despite these, we all arrived in Dubrava NW Kosovo having had about three hours sleep per night and unloaded the aid in the Dubrava prison warehouse with the help of the prison officers. Over the next five days, and with four sixth form students from Leicestershire who flew in via Pristina, we successfully distributed all the aid to extremely vulnerable families, hospitals, schools, temporary refugee shelters, centres for the disabled, and traumatised people. We did this with generous help provided by the young field officers of the ICMC led by Holly Van Buren who provided the lists of the most vulnerable groups and acted as our guides and interpreters. The purpose of the ICMC is to assist the United Nations by caring specifically for the victims of forced migrations.

There were several notable visits during our stay. North of Istog, we visited a Serbian village and church heavily protected by a detachment of Spanish KFOR troops. With their permission and the help of the village elder and the villagers, we were able to unload a considerable quantity of goods for distribution around the entire village. It is the intention in Kosovo to restore a peaceful multi-ethnic society under the new government led by the moderate Ibrahim Rugova, but for the time being, some minorities need considerable protection.

At one ethnic Albanian village, we spent some time with a man and wife who had lost nine members of their family including two daughters aged 13 and 15, father, father-in-law and cousins. All were subsequently discovered after several months. They had been shot and buried deep in a booby-trapped well under tons of rubble. The wife had been a junior school teacher and understandably has been unable to work since. The husband thanked us for the aid we brought to the village. He said that more than the aid we brought, it was our travelling so many miles to visit that had lifted their spirit to live.

At one Roma settlement, we helped a family whose old house was in a state of collapse and were now living in a partially built house next door. Their washing was being done by hand with the aid of a scrubbing brush and an outside metal sink. Their cooking stove was also outside. We noted that one of the teenage girls not only had no shoes, but wore the remnants of socks which were no more than rags. Hardly any of the houses we visited had much if any furniture.

One of our teams was able to help a family who had a daily 2 km walk for water. The man was attempting to dig a well with a broken spade. He had reached a depth of ten of the sixty feet needed to reach water, using a log, a rope and a bucket with which he planned to lift both himself and the rubble each day. We provided all the construction materials and tools to complete the task safely.

In Djakova we visited many families. It is only a few kilometres from the Albanian border and was one of the most badly damaged in Kosovo. It has many hundreds of missing people, more than any other area in Kosovo.

On our final day, we visited two schools in Peje. The first in which junior and senior children attend in shifts, and the second where students come from all over Kosovo to study Creative Art. The pupils' families have to provide all the materials for study. Our interpreter for the day, Arjeta was very upset to have to describe part of the photography students' exhibition to us depicting a house burnt during the war. It happened to be her grandfathers house. He had been killed in the fire. We hope to establish a link between these schools and a group from the Methodist Church in Chandlers Ford.

As we left Kosovo, we were handed a letter from Arjeta. It read:

Dear Friend of Hope and Aid Direct

Albert Camus, the French Philosopher said that where there is no hope, we must invent it.

That powerful notion - inventing hope where there is none - lies at the heart of Hope and Aid Direct's work.

I thank you for helping sustain the noble mission of this remarkable organisation.

In the name of people of Kosovo, thank you again.