

Kosovo, October 2001

by Susie Barker

Fifteen people took part in the convoy. Nine commenced on Saturday 6 October, and drove the vehicles, (a 38 tonne and 3 x 7.5 tonne lorries) arriving on Wednesday 10th at Istok and the remaining six, flew to Pristina on the 10th and were met and taken to Istok. Everyone arrived at Istok within around 2 hours, early evening.

It was a long haul for those who drove to Kosovo. Driving against the clock in torrential rain and often kept waiting for up to six hours at border crossings. The group slept in their trucks over night.

We all stayed at Steve Johnson's house, (otherwise known as Johnno). Steve Johnson is the Deputy Director UNMIK (United Nations Mission in Kosovo) for Dubrava District and main coordinator for our trip. Johnno attends all meetings for NGO (non-governmental organisations) - charities called in by Administration to support community needs. We were very lucky to have his help and hospitality.

Johnno is also the representative for the prisoners who survived the Dubrava massacre at the Dubrava jail. Currently, the last 200 surviving prisoners have been removed to another jail still under the same guards, and many have suffered terribly, throughout. Tortured, untreated wounds, etc. There has been a campaign for some years to get their release. We all hope that they will not suffer for too much longer and that their release will come soon. The warehouse we used was in the grounds of this prison and it was a strange feeling to be there, so close to where so much suffering had taken place. Perhaps it was appropriate for our purpose there!



Our 'big' truck on route to Kosovo

Thursday 11th, we had to await clearance from customs for our trucks, which took some time. We unloaded all the trucks and reloaded them for the following day. The main part of the warehouse was approximately 90 feet by 39 feet, and we filled it with our aid. Another large area we used to share out fresh vegetables for our distribution.

We had been given a landmine awareness briefing. Initially we were told not to leave the road and not to walk on the grass verges.

With the size of our trucks and the width of some of the tracks we went down it would have been very difficult not to drive or step on the grass. We learnt that although some areas are still of concern, that most places have now been cleared, people can work their land and the areas we travelled to were not a worry.

Kosovo is a beautiful country surrounded by mountains. The people are warm, friendly and very welcoming. Each of the people we helped was so grateful for the aid we were able to give them. At the same time it was very emotive for all of us, seeing the conditions the Kosovo's live under. The ruined houses (shelled, burnt out, families living in tents or making habitable one room of a house whilst it was rebuilt.) Seeing the shrines along the roads where massacres had occurred and hearing first hand from these people what had happened to them.

So many of the people we worked closely with had also suffered terribly. We admired them for the courage they had shown, for the resilience and fortitude they now show, by pulling their lives together, helping others rebuilding their homes and lives. They set an example to all of us.

Our whole group was split into two to three smaller groups for all our aid distribution. The following description is for one of those sub groups. This enabled us to reach as many of the people as we could in the time that we had.



Toys delivered to the kindergartens

Friday 12th our group visited 3 kindergartens. Two new buildings in Rakoch and Sushie, followed by a third in Istok. We met the teachers and children and gave out the aid they much needed. Crayons, pens, paper, blankets for their cots, toys etc. It is always so delightful to work with children and watch their faces. In Istok the children sang to us. We then visited the Anton Cetta Warehouse at Scanderaj where aid was left for them to distribute to the people needing help the most. Stopping on a pavement on route, our lorry was entangled in electric cables, but fortunately a local seeing our plight, grabbed a long stick, disentangled us and we moved off safely.

Saturday 13th we set off to take aid to Roma families on the outskirts of Peja and Kline. We made several drops at various houses of EVIs (extremely vulnerable individuals). We were escorted by ICMC (International Catholic Migration Commission. Holly van Buren is the head of housing for the area of Peja. Families were living in very squalid conditions. One elderly woman, almost blind, had her aid delivered through the window, as the door was sealed up, (we can only think that the door was sealed up during the war and that is the only place she was able to live.) She sat in the middle of her small dark room on the floor. We were told that her two grandchildren help her, but I am sure that we all felt that we wanted to put her somewhere where she could be looked after more appropriately and comfortably.



Blind lady in her home

One of our last drops, involved crossing two rivers, (one where the bow wave almost came over the windscreen of a 4 x 4 and the other where we were able to use the bridge but the wheels only just fitted on)!! Later, whilst giving out the aid, there was a terrible noise and crashing sound, when we looked back, a tractor and trailer containing tree branches had toppled over a high bank and landed on the narrow track, which we had to return on, to get to the main road. Fortunately no-one was hurt, and the men gathered together and managed to remove the branches, remove the trailer from the tractor and finally get the tractor out of the way. Just another little moment in a busy but rewarding day.

Sunday 14th we visited a refugee centre in a former prison Gurakovc, a very grim place, many families living there in terrible conditions.



The refugee centre

One of the other groups visited a Serb enclave Osojane, which is heavily guarded by KFOR troops (Kosovo force). Hence the motto of Hope & Aid Direct, We take aid, not sides. This village is the first to have a planned influx of Serbian refugee returnees. Another Serb enclave at Gorazdevac was guarded around the clock by Italian KFOR. All remaining Serbian Orthodox Churches were also heavily guarded

On our last day, we were able to borrow a truck from the Kosovo Force with help from three of the soldiers to deliver the last of our aid. In between our visits, which could take us every which way!

Everyone loaded up the trucks, which took a considerable time, sorting out what was needed on board, for the next visit. The prison officers, ICMC, Kosovo Force all helped with loading and unloading, for which we were very grateful.

Monday 15th visited families in the Peja area. To visit many of the families, we covered long distances to the more isolated areas where people were very needy. We again went with the ICMC.

Tuesday 16th visited the hospital in Peja. Following this we went to two women's centres with ICMC and Kosovo Force, in Decani and Jacova (these were day refuges for vulnerable, traumatised women and children, working with them the staff helped them come to terms with what had happened and to work towards their future.



The ICMC Team

The convoy (all the people driving), had planned to leave that morning, but due to the 38 tonne truck losing the main leaf off the front axle spring—they were grounded until 2.30 pm on Wed 17th.

Bernie and Don visited a family that Bernie and I had met before. They live just at the back of where we are staying. There are nine members of the family, the father is a school caretaker earning around 150 Dms a month, which is around £50. Don and Bernie had promised to try to get a computer out to them. They are a lovely family. Bernie and I met the grandmother one morning whilst walking near their home, she then insisted on taking us back to meet the family, who insisted on giving us coffee and it all went from there.

We were told that unemployment is around 90% very difficult to get a job. That 85% of homes had been damaged. There is a massive rebuilding programme, everyone working very hard and in some areas they say that 70% have been rebuilt for example the town of Pristina. Many areas, especially cut off areas, very little had been done as yet. It will be a massive task.

We all left on Wednesday 17th some to drive and others to fly home. Having eight days of sunshine in Kosovo (after all the rain on the way there) helped tremendously with all the visits, loading and unloading.

I believe, we all felt very privileged to work with people who had resisted the oppression, suffered terribly and now worked hard to rebuild morale, esteem, and their beloved country to a free and peaceful nation KOSOVO. I am sure we all want to go back again to help in any way we can.