

REFUGEE COUNCIL OF AUSTRALIA

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KOSOVO SAFE HAVENS : Views from the Community Sector

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(1) Background

Under the terms of the Funding Agreement between the Department of Immigration and Multicultural Affairs (DIMA) and the Refugee Council of Australia (RCOA) for 1999–2000, DIMA asked RCOA to submit a written report containing reflections on the Kosovo Safe Haven exercise. This report is written in this context and submitted together with the Director's report on her field visit to Kosovo (November 1999) to fulfil Section A3 of Schedule 1 of the Funding Agreement.

(2) Terms of Reference

Advice was sought from DIMA about the nature and scope of this report. In response, DIMA indicated that the report should:

- concentrate on NSW;

- expand on the July 1999 NSW Report;
- cover issues such as reception, accommodation, services and community relations; and
- focus on lessons learned.

RCOA has prepared this report with these guidelines in mind. It is important to stress that this report does not constitute an evaluation of the Kosovar Safe Haven exercise nor should it be seen in this light. Given the significance of Operation Safe Haven, ie the first time in Australian immigration history that refugees have been brought to this country with the express purpose that it be for short-term respite rather than resettlement, and the fact that it constituted the largest peacetime humanitarian exercise this country has undertaken, it is of vital importance to those who may have to deal with future evacuations and to immigration historians that the exercise be carefully evaluated and documented by way of, inter alia:

- formal recorded debriefing of personnel involved in policy making and those in key positions dealing with day to day administration;
- development of manuals that show what was done, when and by whom;
- an independent performance audit;
- recording the experiences of individuals and agencies that were involved in the exercise, including the Kosovar evacuees;
- academic studies of Operation Safe Haven.

Some of this work has already begun. Many of the individual agencies that were involved in Operation Safe Haven have undertaken internal evaluations of their own operations and RCOA has been made aware of at least two theses that are being written about specific aspects of the exercise. In addition, there have been some attempts to draw out lessons from the exercise, including:

- the NSW Initial Reception Process Debrief Report prepared by DIMA NSW; and
- the two papers prepared by the Refugee Resettlement Advisory Council Secretariat within DIMA: "Report on Phase 1" and "Lessons Learnt".

Much, however, remains to be done. The Council's report should be seen in the context of this documentation and reflection process but should not be seen as a substitute for more formal evaluations in NSW and nationally.

The Refugee Council's report is an attempt to draw out the experiences of various people involved at different levels in the NSW Havens. It does not document processes, procedures and relationships. What it does do is to use the reflections of those interviewed to identify commonality of perception about what worked and what could have been done better, and from this devise a set of recommendations to assist those who may be involved in planning future operations.

It is important to recognise that this report has been written from an NGO perspective, with considerable weight also being given to the views expressed by members of the Albanian community. This is in recognition of their unique perception of what occurred and their ability to assess the extent to which the needs of the Kosovar refugees were met. This being said, it is hoped that this report will add to the body of knowledge derived from this important and innovative exercise.

Full report available (in hard copy) from the Council for \$27.50 (inc GST)