

Report on RCOA field visit to Kosovo and the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia

November 1999

Sincere thanks are expressed to the staff of CARE Macedonia and CARE Kosovo who provided invaluable advice and logistical assistance during my stay in the region.

(1) Introduction:

The failure of the Rambouillet Peace Talks in February 1999 resulted in NATO launching an offensive on 24th March in defence of the majority ethnic-Albanian population of the southern Serbian province of Kosovo. During the 78 day air war, over 840,000 ethnic Albanians fled or were expelled. This was not the largest exodus the international community has seen but it was arguably the most public and it was one that necessitated many countries becoming involved, including Australia.

In April 1999 the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) issued an appeal to members of the international community to be part of an international effort to evacuate ethnic Albanian Kosovar refugees from the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia (FYROM). UNHCR had never before made such an appeal and it did so on this occasion only because of the very specific circumstances that prevailed in FYROM at the time. FYROM, like Bosnia, is an ethnically divided state, and the sudden influx of over a quarter of a million refugees from Kosovo threatened to tip the fragile balance that exists between the Macedonian and Albanian sections of the population.

The Humanitarian Evacuation Program (as it became known) resulted in over 91,000 refugees being moved on a temporary or permanent basis to 29 countries around the world. This relieved the pressure in FYROM and ensured that the border remained open to those fleeing Kosovo.

Australia was one of the countries that responded to UNHCR's call. It did so by introducing a new legislative framework to allow for temporary visas ("Safe Haven Visas") and established eight reception centres (Safe Havens) around Australia. Close to 4,000 Kosovars came to Australia as part of Operation Safe Haven, the largest peace-time humanitarian exercise this country has seen. At the time of writing, over 87% of those who came have returned to their homeland. The future of the remaining 500 remains unclear.

The Refugee Council of Australia participated in numerous planning meetings for Operation Safe Haven and was contracted by the Department of Immigration and Multicultural Affairs to develop and deliver training for the Department of Defence personnel who would work with the Kosovars. In addition, close links were established with the Albanian community nationally and in various states. When the opportunity arose to revisit the Balkans in October this year, it seemed appropriate to include a visit Kosovo to see first hand the province that had been the centre of attention for so many months and to find out more about what the Kosovars were returning to. It was decided to combine this with a visit to FYROM, whose circumstances precipitated the Humanitarian Evacuation Program and where the failure to address the concerns of the ethnic minorities have left the country sitting on a time bomb which, if it goes off, will have far reaching consequences for the region.

(2) The Field Visit:

This was my third visit to the Balkans on behalf of the Refugee Council. The first was undertaken in August 1995 and focused on the expulsion of Croatian Serbs from the Krajina and the massacre of Bosnian Muslims at Srebrenica. The second was in September 1998 and focused on durable solutions for the half million refugees in the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia. Reports of both of these missions are available from the Refugee Council.

My third field visit to the region was undertaken from 8th–22nd October 1999 and took in Bosnia, Serbia, Kosovo and the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia (FYROM). It is documented in two separate reports, one covering Bosnia and Serbia, the other (this report) covering Kosovo and FYROM.

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