

ALBANIA: REFUGEE INFLUX FROM KOSOVO

26 June 1998

appeal no. 17/98

situation report no. 02/98

period covered: 15-22 June 1998

Since 2 June some 73 tons of food and non-food items have been distributed to over 5,000 refugees through the Albanian Red Cross/Federation relief operation. Further supplies are on their way from Tirana to meet the on-going needs of 10,000 refugees in the Tropoje region.

The context

On 29 May Serbian forces launched a sustained attack on villages in the south west of Kosovo, particularly around the towns of Decani and Djakovic, provoking a mass movement of the majority ethnic Albanian population. Over the next few days, some 8,000 people arrived in the northern region of Tropoje in Albania, having walked for up to 30 hours through rough mountain terrain. There are now thought to be 12,000 refugees requiring assistance, with the overwhelming majority women, children and elderly people. It is estimated that children under 16 make up between 50 and 60% of the refugee population.

Tropoje is one of the poorest regions of Albania, where people live a precarious existence. The terrain is mountainous and there are severe problems with water supply and electricity. Communications are extremely difficult with only one telephone line out of the main town, Bajram Curri. The journey from the Albanian capital Tirana takes at least five hours by a mountain road of poor quality and prone to closure by mud slides. The alternative is a ten hour journey by an overcrowded ferry. Only small trucks of maximum 10 ton capacity can reach Tropoje.

Refugees have been accommodated in the homes of the local population, often with 12 to 20 people living in two small rooms of not more than three metres square each. The population of Bajram Curri, the region's main town, has swollen from 8,000 to over 10,000 as a result of the influx. It is clear that the local population cannot sustain this burden for much longer.

A joint assessment team from the Albanian Red Cross (ARC)/International Federation/ICRC arrived in the area on 2 June. The ARC, with the support of the Federation, began a relief

operation immediately the scale of population movement became apparent, distributing seven tons of food within two days.

It quickly became clear that the refugees would not be returning to their homes in the short or medium term and on 11 June, the Federation launched an emergency appeal seeking CHF 3,223,000 on behalf of the Albanian Red Cross to fund a relief operation to meet the basic food and hygiene needs of 10,000 people for four months.

Latest events

Kosovo remains in the international spotlight due to its political sensitivity. The international community continues to promote a peaceful solution through mediated dialogue although military intervention has not been ruled out. The main thrust of political activity over the last week has been to try to persuade President Milosevic of Yugoslavia to withdraw his forces from Kosovo.

On 15 June, UNHCR reported 365 people crossing the border, who claimed that they had come under fire, and that furthermore at least 1,000 people had been prevented from coming across. Over the next few days, the flow of refugees slowed to around 30 a day, leading to speculation that the border had been sealed.

The media has also reported skirmishes in Stimlje, east of previous fighting. UNHCR estimates that there are now 45,000 internally displaced people in Kosovo who may seek to leave via other borders, perhaps to the south of the Tropoje crossing or into Montenegro. By 21 June, the Red Cross of Montenegro had registered 8,000 internally displaced from Kosovo while UNHCR estimated a higher number -- 10,500.

On Thursday 11 June, President Meidani of Albania visited Tropoje, holding meetings with the local authority, police, hospital and refugee families. He was accompanied by the OSCE ambassador to Albania and the American ambassador. He thanked the international community for its help and promised action on security in the area.

The government ministry for local authorities has taken over administration of the refugee crisis from the local authority, re-registering refugees and drawing up precise beneficiary lists. This process is now complete and local authorities have registered some 6,500 refugees in Tropoje. Since the number leaving the country is likely to be negligible, this raises the question of whether people are moving out of Tropoje to other areas or whether a significant number of people are reluctant to be registered.

The government is pursuing a policy of keeping refugees in the Tropoje area and has pledged funds to assist. However, the local authority is pressing for them to be moved to less-impooverished districts in a systematic manner.

Meanwhile, refugees seem to be taking the initiative and are moving away from Tropoje of their own accord. Local Red Cross branches around Tirana in particular are reporting increasing numbers of refugees from Kosovo seeking their assistance. The ARC branch in Durres is assisting more than 400 people; the Tirana branch is assisting more than 150, while more than 60 have sought help from the Fieri branch. These local branches have organised their own fund-raising and distribution.

Red Cross/Red Crescent action

The ARC/International Federation relief operation began in Tropoje on 2 June with a distribution of seven tons of food and medical supplies. The ARC's stock of emergency supplies was quickly moved up to Tropoje by road. To date over 73 MT of food, together with non-food relief items

such as washing powder, soap, mattresses and blankets, has been distributed to over 5,000 beneficiaries at five sites:

Commodity	Quantity
Flour	32.696 MT
White beans	14.270 MT
Pasta	8.601 MT
Sugar	8.500 MT
Rice	8.475 MT
Vegetable oil	8159 litres
Washing powder	2.735 MT
Salt	0.493 MT
Tea	0.602 MT
Soap	6,400 pces
Mattresses	2,180 pces
Blankets	842 pces
Towels	600 pces

The emergency appeal has met with a generous and swift response and is now 90% covered, taking into account both hard and soft pledges. For further details, please see annex.

Further supplies are on their way to Tirana to meet the ongoing needs of 10,000 refugees in the Tropoje area. The Federation's Regional Logistics Centre in Zagreb has purchased the commodities shown below. Seven of an anticipated 16 trucks have arrived with the remainder in transit.

Commodity	Quantity
Towels (80 x 100 cm)	5,000 pces
Toothpaste (75 ml tube)	5,000 pces
Shampoo (250 ml bottle)	5,000 pces
Blankets (150 x 200 cm, 50% wool)	5,000 pces
Washing powder (3 kg bags)	5,000 bags
Soap (100 g)	5,000 pces
Straps	5,000 pces
Mattresses, single with cover	5,000 pces
Wheat flour	30 MT
White beans	10 MT
Sugar	5 MT
Vegetable oil	5000 litres
Oral rehydration salt	50,000 sachets
Baby food (each 500 g)	2000 packs

The Federation presence in Albania was designated a delegation on 6 June. The necessary steps to set up offices and effective communications are now underway. The delegation will support to the National Society which has considerable experience in providing emergency relief gained during the civil disturbances in 1997.

There have been a number of security incidents in Tropoje involving theft from vehicles, loss of a vehicle at gun-point and looting of a warehouse. These incidents have been reported to the appropriate authorities and humanitarian organisations are working jointly on a security plan.

Amongst its expatriate personnel in Tropoje, an ICRC medical delegate is supporting medical needs of the refugees while a tracing delegate has overseen the opening of three Red Cross message centres. It also has medical stocks specifically to treat the war wounded who arrive in the country.

The ICRC is co-operating with Voice of America Albanian language service and Radio Tirana to broadcast the names of refugees who have arrived safely and plans to establish a presence further south, in Kukes.

The Federation and ICRC continue to maintain the good working spirit and co-operation between the two components. Meetings are held to share information. The ICRC also represents the Movement at a security committee established by the international agencies. The ICRC is in the process of setting up an office in Kukes.

Extensive interviews and briefings have been provided by the Federation information delegate in Albania to international media representatives. The Albanian Red Cross has secured half an hour of prime time television for a documentary about the Red Cross response to the situation, which should be completed over the coming week.

Outstanding needs

The major needs described by refugees are for food, mattresses, blankets, hygiene items, clothes and baby food. The remoteness of the region makes communication between Tirana and Tropoje extremely difficult and there is an urgent need to improve communications between the two centres. A Federation telecom delegate arrived in Albania on 16 June.

The ARC is a joint participant in the contingency plan for the current emergency and a major player in the relief operation. It is the main humanitarian organisation in Albania and is well placed to meet the demands of the crisis. However, if the numbers of refugees continues to increase, as is likely, and if people continue to migrate south from Tropoje, its branches will require additional support. To date, the ARC has been able to continue its traditional and regular planned activities.

External relations - Government/UN/NGOs/Media

UNHCR is co-ordinating the UN's emergency contingency plan and an airlift of some 150 tons of food and non-food items from Sarajevo to Tirana has begun. Stocks are arriving in Tropoje, including cooking sets, women's and children's shoes and socks, plastic sheeting (heavy duty and light weight) kitchen sets, jerry cans, mattresses, blankets and detergents. UNHCR is also carrying out a needs assessment, with collaboration of agencies in Tropoje. The ARC/Federation have pledged support for this and will help with the planned interviews of 200 families.

WFP has transported 500 tons of food to Durres but has no plans at present to commence distribution in Tropoje unless Red Cross supplies prove insufficient. However, WFP has stepped in on an informal basis to make up a Red Cross shortfall in flour which has yet to arrive from Zagreb.

OXFAM will be responsible for water and sanitation while MSF, Merlin and Children's Aid Direct have volunteered to assist in the health sector. UNICEF has distributed a limited quantity of medical supplies and soap. A number of smaller agencies have begun to arrive in the area.

UNHCR is investigating the possibility of renovating buildings to act as collective centres and has engaged the help of a German construction company, the International Rescue Committee and Oxfam. This approach has the backing of the Albanian Government's local authority ministry. Three sites are under active consideration, which will house some 800 people. A second list has been drawn up to provide accommodation for 1500 people as needed.

The local authority ministry representative has established a daily meeting with international agencies. An interagency forum meeting three times a week has also been established, led by UNHCR. This is intended to act as an information exchange, for co-ordination between agencies and as a forum to discuss security.

Contributions

See Annex 1 for details. For more information please contact Leopoldo Principe, Desk Officer on 7304319, email: principe@ifrc.org

Conclusion

Although the situation in Tropoje is now stabilising, there is still reason to believe that the crisis is not yet over. Continued fighting in Kosovo appears to be creating large numbers of internally displaced while reports that the border has been closed at Tropoje are giving cause for concern. There remains an expectation that people may start to cross the border at Kukes. The ARC/Federation/ICRC are monitoring the situation closely and have contingency plans in place.

The International Federation is also monitoring developments in the FYR of Macedonia with a delegate supporting the Red Cross there and an emergency relief stock is in place.

Peter Rees-Gildea
Director
Operations Funding and Reporting Department

Renny Nancholas
Director
Europe Department