ALBANIA
REFUGEE INFLUX FROM KOSOVO

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Relief distribution plans for July have been drawn up with 7,500 beneficiaries targeted. The plans were set in motion on 27 June, beginning with distribution to 3,190 beneficiaries in Bajram Curri. Further relief supplies are en route to Albania.

The context

On 29 May heavy fighting broke out 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 course of the next few days, some 8,000 people arrived in the northern region of Tropoje where there are now thought to be 10-12,000 refugees requiring assistance, with the overwhelming majority being women, children and elderly people.

Tropoje is one of the poorest regions of Albania and refugees have been accommodated in the homes of local people. The population of Bajram Curri, the region's main town, has swollen by 30% to over 10,000 as a result of the influx. It is clear that the local population cannot sustain this burden for much longer.

Immediately following the crisis, the Albania Red Cross (ARC)/International Federation distributed relief items from stock in Tirana. Following an assessment mission on 11 June the Federation launched an emergency appeal seeking CHF 3,223,000 on behalf of ARC to fund a relief operation to meet the basic food and hygiene needs of 10,000 people for four months.

Latest events

International attempts to persuade President Milosevic of the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia to withdraw his forces from Kosovo continued without success. As the special US envoy Richard Holbrooke shuttled between meetings in Kosovo and Belgrade, the ethnic Albanian leader in Kosovo, Ibrahim Rugova, returned from talks in western Europe. Amidst fears of a further escalation in fighting spilling over the border into Albania or FYR Macedonia, the US administration launched talks with the forces of the Kosovo Liberation Army in an attempt to curtail their military campaign, and with the option of NATO military action appearing to recede.

Both sides claimed control of the strategically important mining centre of Belacevac amid accusations of abuses of human rights.

A number of disturbing security incidents were experienced during the reporting period. During a relief distribution on 19 June carried out in Tropoje by Islamic Relief, police fired warning shots into the air killing one person and injuring four others. This incident interrupted distribution for all agencies until 27 June.

On 15 June, UNHCR reported 365 people crossing the border. In the days following, the average daily influx was 25. It is believed that some 1,500 people are trapped in the mountains and unable to cross the border in safety.

The process of reregistering refugees, undertaken by the government ministry for local authorities, has been completed: 7,102 refugees have been registered in Tropoje. The government continues to pursue a policy of keeping the refugees in the Tropoje area and has pledged funds to assist. However, the local authority is pressing for them to be moved to less impoverished districts in a systematic manner.

Meanwhile, refugees seem to be taking the initiative and UNHCR estimates that 4,000 refugees have left for other parts of Albania. Red Cross branches around Tirana report increasing numbers of refugees from Kosovo seeking their assistance. The ARC branch in Durres is assisting more than 400 people; the Tirana branch more than 150, while over 60 have sought help from the Fieri branch.

Red Cross/Red Crescent action

The ARC/Federation has agreed a joint food distribution with WFP which has over 500 MT of food in Durres. Based on the new beneficiary lists drawn up by the local authorities and the daily arrival rate of refugees, ARC/Federation/WFP have taken the figure of 7,500 beneficiaries as a working figure for the July food distribution in Tropoje.

A distribution plan for July has been drawn up and was set in motion on 27 June, starting with 3,190 beneficiaries in Bajram Curri.

All food and non-food items are delivered to the ARC/Federation warehouses in Tirana or Durres, after customs clearance in Tirana. From these two points, goods are transported by road to Bajram Curri and then on to the five distribution points — Bajram Curri, Tropoje, Bujan, Margegaj and Fierza. Micro-distributions are co-ordinated by the local authorities in liaison with the staff of ARC/Federation. Distribution takes place according to lists and it is usually to the heads of the refugee and host families that the relief items are distributed. Depending on the condition of the terrain, the goods are then transported by the beneficiaries to their homes by means of a motor vehicle or on horseback/donkey.

To date, ARC/Federation have distributed over 73 MT of food, together with non-food relief items such as washing powder, soap, mattresses and blankets to over 5,000 beneficiaries.

The response to the emergency appeal has been swift and generous.

Further food and non-food relief supplies have been purchased by the Regional Logistics Centre in Zagreb, and thirteen of an anticipated sixteen trucks have already arrived in Tirana.

Commodity	Qty/mth/person	Qty supplied by WFP	Qty supplied by ARC/Federation	TOTAL
Flour	14 kg	75 MT	30 MT	**105 MT**
Beans	1.2 kg	2.2 MT	6.8 MT	**9 MT**
Oil	1 litre	2,800 litres	4,700 litres	**7,500 litres**
Sugar	0.5 kg	0 MT	3.7 MT	**3.7 MT**

Other food and non-food items distributed by the ARC/Federation to date, include:

Commodity	Quantity
Pasta	8.601 MT
Rice	8.475 MT
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

Local authorities will provide humanitarian agencies with detailed beneficiary lists which will enable monitoring and correct reporting. The ARC has proposed to take over micro-distribution from the local authorities — an initiative supported by WFP who propose making ARC/Federation its implementing partner.

The ARC/Federation is this week (beginning 29 June) undertaking an assessment mission in Kukes to verify that the DPP data corresponds to the current/anticipated situation.

The issue of assistance to host families is still pending. All humanitarian organisations in the country agree that it is important to support these families; but a system for this assistance has still to be set up. ARC/Federation has set up a temporary system whereby a monthly ration of 14 kgs/beneficiary (instead of the standard 12 kgs/beneficiary) is provided to the beneficiaries, with the extra 2 kgs for the host family.

A security committee has been established at which the Federation is represented by the ICRC. Biweekly inter-agency meetings are also taking place in Tirana with the active participation of the ARC/Federation.

ARC/Federation/ICRC are working closely together in the area. ICRC has a presence in Tropoje and also further east in Kukes.

Outstanding needs

The major needs described by refugees continue to be for food, mattresses, blankets, hygiene items, clothes and baby food.

There is concern that the host families' resources are being stretched to breaking point and that without support for them an additional crisis will develop in the Tropoje region Tropoje.

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 telecom delegate, who arrived in Albania on 16 June, is assisting in this field.

If the number of refugees continues to increase, as is likely, and if people continue to move south from Tropoje, ARC branches will require additional support. To date, ARC has been able to continue its traditional and regular planned activities.

External relations - Government/UN/NGOs/Media

A UNHCR airlift of some 150 tons of food and non-food items from Sarajevo to Tirana has now been completed, and stocks are arriving in Tropoje, including cooking sets, women's and children's shoes and socks, plastic sheeting (heavy duty and lightweight), jerry cans, mattresses, blankets and detergent. UNHCR is carrying out a needs assessment with agencies in Tropoje. ARC/Federation have pledged support for this and will help with the planned interviews of 200 families.

Islamic Relief is distributing 40 tons of food to host families in a bid to relieve pressure on their limited resources.

Co-ordination meetings for national and local government authorities and aid agencies have been established at various levels. The government local authority ministry representative has established a daily meeting with international agencies in Tropoje and a biweekly meeting in Tirana. The Albanian Refugee Committee will be opening an office in Bajram Curri this week. An interagency forum meeting three times a week in Bajram Curri has also been established, led by UNHCR. This will 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 details please contact Leopoldo Principe, Desk Officer, on ++4122 7304319, email: principe@ifrc.org

Conclusion

Although the number of refugees arriving in Tropoje has slowed dramatically the crisis is far from over. Reports of a possible escalation of fighting in Kosovo could have serious consequences for the current relief operation in Albania, and may cause IDPs in Kosovo to try to leave across other borders crossings. ARC/Federation continue to monitor developments closely, both from Tirana and in the FYR of Macedonia, where a Federation representative is assisting the National Society with its emergency preparedness plans.

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