

# **ALBANIA**

## **REFUGEE INFLUX FROM KOSOVO**

30 July 1998

*appeal no. 17/98*

*situation report no. 04/98*

*period covered: 29 June to 26 July 1998*

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*The Albanian Red Cross/International Federation relief operation continues, with the August distribution to target 7,000 refugees in Tropoje and 3,000 refugees in other parts of Albania. The question of long term support for the refugees is a priority for the Red Cross in Albania ahead of the winter months.*

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### ***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 — one of the poorest in Albania — where there are now thought to be up to 12,000 refugees requiring assistance, with the overwhelming majority being women, children and elderly people.

Refugees have been accommodated in the homes of local people, and 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 in the longer term.

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

### ***Latest events***

Fighting continued to escalate in Kosovo between Serb forces and the Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA) for control of strategic villages and roads, with accusations of human rights abuses on both sides. Over the past week counter offensives by Serb forces have resulted in the retaking of the town of Orahovac and strategic points on the main Pristina-Pec road. Calls from the international community for negotiations to bring a halt to the hostilities appear futile in the current climate, with reports of exchanges of fire over the border between Serb and Albanian forces adding fears that Albania will enter the conflict.

The influx of refugees into northern Albania has virtually ceased due to the near-complete depopulation of villages along the northwestern Albania/Kosovo border. In addition Serb forces have effectively sealed the border area, making it unsafe to use even the most difficult mountain routes. However, 28 casualties from the fighting in Kosovo were brought from the Albania/Kosovo border near Tropoje on

18 July and received urgent medical attention in Bajram Curri, with the ICRC and the ARC/Federation assisting in the operation.

Due to increasing security concerns in the Tropoje district, a decision was taken on 25 July that all NGOs not engaged in essential activities would withdraw from Tropoje to Tirana. This followed a number of incidents involving the armed hold up of aid agency vehicles, theft and shootings in the area. MSF, THW, Oxfam, Children's Aid Direct and the ECHO representative have now left Tropoje. ARC/Federation and ICRC together with the UN will continue to maintain their essential operations in the area.

Meanwhile, refugees continue to leave Tropoje for other parts of Albania. To date more than 1,500 have made themselves known to Red Cross branches in five main towns. It is estimated that at least another 1,500 still remain unaccounted for. Local authorities in towns outside Tropoje are not registering refugees and the problem of their official recognition remains to be solved with the Government.

### ***Red Cross/Red Crescent action***

The ARC/Federation relief operation began in Tropoje on 2 June with a pre-placed emergency stock. To date, ARC/Federation have distributed 255 mt of food, together with non-food items such as washing powder, soap, mattresses and blankets to 10,043 refugees in Tropoje and 750 refugees in five towns in other parts of Albania.

#### ***Items distributed since 2 June***

<b>Commodity</b>	<b>Quantity</b>
Flour	188.5 MT
White beans	17.2MT
Pasta	8.6 MT
Sugar	15.6MT
Rice	10.7 MT
Vegetable oil	14.3MT
Salt	0.49 MT
Washing powder	3.7MT
Soap	9,640 bars
Mattresses	2,854
Blankets	1,168
Towels	600
Shampoo	400 bottles

Doubts about the accuracy of registration figures for refugees in Tropoje are causing problems for the joint Red Cross/WFP July distribution, which was to have been made to 7,500 refugees in Tropoje, a figure agreed with the local authorities. A new figure of 10,043 was presented when distribution began, although the outflow of refugees from the area had exceeded the inflow over the previous few weeks. The figure of 10,043 was finally accepted pending a re-registration process to be supported by UNHCR for the August distribution. The latest figure presented by local authorities is for 15,000 refugees, although this probably includes host families and does not take into account the fact that refugees leaving the area are not being de-registered.

In line with the appeal, the ARC/Federation have declared that the Red Cross has food parcels for 10,000 refugees from August until end October. For the August distribution 7,000 will be provided for refugees in Tropoje and 3,000 for refugees in other parts of Albania. The arrival of food and hygiene parcels continued in preparation for the August distribution. To date 1,500 food parcels and 3,884 hygiene parcels have been received from German Red Cross. Swiss Red Cross has supplied 7,128 food parcels and the Danish Red Cross 9,997 hygiene parcels. 67,442 jars of baby food have also arrived from the Austrian Red Cross.

During the reporting period ARC/Federation conducted an assessment mission to Kukes (to the south-east of Tropoje), to conclude disaster preparedness plans in the event of another influx of refugees. Warehousing has been reserved and the local Red Cross branch is being readied to react in an emergency.

ICRC and the Federation continue to work closely in Tropoje, and carried out a joint operation to assist the wounded brought over the border on 18 July.

ICRC has also carried out an assessment of hospitals and dispensaries in Tropoje, Kukes and Has and has provided more than 30 different medical sets (dressing sets, paediatric sets, surgery sets, etc.) and various other medical materials. Emergency stocks have also been set up in Tirana, in case of a further deterioration in the situation.

A tracing service has also been provided by the ICRC through the Albanian Red Cross and more than 130 refugee families have been able to inform their relatives of their present location through Radio Tirana and the Voice of America.

The Federation's Regional Telecom delegate has installed VHF radio equipment in all vehicles being used in the operation and a reliable satellite link has been installed in Tropoje.

The Federation's current delegation in the country comprises a Head of Delegation, a Head of the Sub-delegation in Tropoje, a Finance/Administration Delegate and a Logistics/Relief Delegate. A new Information Delegate took up her position in Tirana on 29 July 1998.

## ***Outstanding needs***

The question of support to host families remains a concern, and must be resolved to avoid the problem of these families registering as refugees. A growing number of refugees are being evicted from host families as the burden increases. UNHCR has found premises locally to accommodate some of those evicted, but if support is not provided soon to host families, serious friction may arise between refugees and the local population.

The policy of keeping several thousand refugees only a few kilometres from the border is one which has been seriously questioned by the ARC/Federation. UNHCR has now raised this matter with the Government. As tensions mount, the safety of refugees in the event of the conflict spilling over the border has become a major concern. The Government has now accepted an initial proposal from UNHCR to provide accommodation in three areas outside Tropoje. These are near Shkoder, Burrel and Librazd. Premises there will be adapted to provide accommodation for up to 1,000 refugees. The construction of prefabricated dwellings is also under consideration.

In between food distributions, the distribution of non food items such as mattresses, blankets and hygiene items continues. These items continue to be cited as the most needed.

## ***External relations - Government/UN/NGOs/Media***

The ARC/Federation continue to maintain close contact with other agencies active in the area: working very closely with the UNHCR in Tropoje on the co-ordinated distribution of non-food items and continuing discussions with WFP regarding distribution plans.

ARC/Federation maintains its presence in Tropoje for the moment, following the evacuation of many other agencies. Relations with the government co-ordinator in Tropoje are good and a regular exchange of views on a formal and informal level are maintained. However Government policy relating to the treatment of refugees is unclear, and ARC/Federation have requested a high level meeting to get clarification of Government policy, particularly in connection with the registration of and assistance to refugees outside Tropoje.

## ***Contributions***

See Annex 1 for details.

## ***Conclusion***

The influx of new refugees has virtually ceased over the last three weeks. With an estimated 50 to 100 refugees leaving the north every day in search of better conditions, by winter at least half the refugee population (an estimated 5,000) will probably have left the north to be accommodated privately or in collective centres. At present the Albanian Red Cross is the only organisation systematically planning for their assistance. Its branch network will be of vital importance in this event.

That said, the recent escalation of fighting in Kosovo indicates that the flow of refugees may recommence at any time, especially with a reported 100,000 displaced inside the country. Disaster preparedness planning continues and the question of long term support for the refugees is a priority for the Red Cross in Albania. The situation is highly unpredictable, and although some former crossing points are sealed, refugees might seek to cross further south — hence the assessment mission to Kukes. For more information donors are invited to contact Penny Elghady, Desk Officer on ++4122 7304450, email: [elghady@ifrc.org](mailto:elghady@ifrc.org)

Peter Rees-Gildea  
Director  
Operations Funding and  
Reporting Department

Renny Nancholas  
Director  
Europe Department