

ALBANIA: REFUGEE INFLUX FROM KOSOVO

9 October 1998

appeal no. 17/98

situation report no. 6/98

period covered: 29 August - 30 September 1998

As Montenegro closed its borders to new internally displaced persons from Kosovo in mid September, Albania witnessed an increase in the total number of refugees following an influx of 4,600 from Montenegro to the town of Shkodra. While struggling to respond to refugee needs, the country faced further political instability following the assassination of an opposition politician.

The context

On 29 May heavy fighting broke out in south-west 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 regions in Albania. Following further influxes during the month of September some estimates put the total number of refugees to have entered Albania at over 20,000, with the overwhelming majority women, children and elderly people.

An estimated 3-4,000 refugees remain in the Tropoje district near the border with Kosovo. With the burden on the local host family population taking its toll, large numbers of refugees are leaving the border areas, moving further south to live in and around the cities of Tirana, Durres, Shkodra and in ten other districts.

Immediately following the initial influx of refugees in June, the Albanian Red Cross (ARC)/International Federation distributed relief items from pre-placed stocks 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 until 31 October. On 28 August a revised Appeal was launched, seeking an additional CHF 1,556,000 to support 15,000 beneficiaries for two more months until the end of December.

Latest events

September saw an increase in political and social tensions throughout Albania. The assassination of a leading opposition political figure in the middle of the month was followed by two days of violence and demonstrations in the capital Tirana. However, since 14 September demonstrations have been peaceful and of a smaller scale, and calls by opposition leader Sali Berisha to rally the country to overthrow the Socialist coalition government have for the most part gone unheeded. At the same time, his parliamentary immunity has been revoked, leaving him subject to arrest. At the end of the month, Prime Minister Fatos Nano resigned - one of the main demands of those involved in the earlier disturbances. His replacement, the former student activist leader Pandeli Majko, was tasked with forming a new government, which was sworn in at the beginning of October.

Fighting in Kosovo continued during the month, with the UNHCR claiming that an estimated 200,000 people are now without homes in the province. While the number of refugees crossing into Albania from Kosovo remained small, as the border blockade continued, an increase was witnessed in the number entering through Montenegro. This resulted in a new concentration of refugees in the town of Shkodra, which saw figures jump from 1,000 to over 4,000 in mid-September.

Refugee numbers in the Tropoje region are estimated to have fallen to between 3-4,000 persons. With local families continuing to evict their refugee guests, as the strain of accommodating such large numbers over several months proves intolerable, increasing numbers of refugees are moving south and figures in Tirana (6,000) and Durres (4,000) increased. The official registration process, however, remains in disarray. Many refugees were not registered on arrival in Albania and those who were registered and moved on, have not been removed from the registration lists. A proposal for re-registration utilising photo-ID cards has been made by UNHCR.

Security concerns continued in the border district, and all major aid agencies have now withdrawn from Tropoje. During the month of September, the ARC/Federation warehouse in Bajram Curri was looted, and two ARC vehicles were forcibly taken (one of which has since been returned). It is becoming increasingly difficult to work in the Tropoje area. However, Red Cross distributions in the district continue, through the local branch of the Albanian Red Cross.

Red Cross/Red Crescent action

The ARC/Federation relief operation began in Tropoje on 2 June with a pre-placed emergency stock.

Items distributed since 2 June 1998 (Albania)

Commodity	September distribution	Total since operation began
Food Parcels	8,460	16,912
Flour		220 MT
White beans	1.75 MT	25.45 MT
Pasta		8.8 MT
Sugar		18.7MT
Rice		10.7 MT
Vegetable oil	1.75	21.95 MT

Salt		0.213 MT
Hygiene parcels	8,489	14,861
Washing powder	1 MT	11.9 MT
Soap		16,923 bars
Mattresses	2,425.00	8,204
Blankets	2,650	7,941
Towels		1,348
Shampoo		3,128 bottles
Toothpaste		2,568 tubes
Babyfood	2,592 bottles	2,592 bottles

Security concerns prompted by the unrest in Tirana put a temporary halt to the Red Cross's September distribution of relief items. However, despite the interruption, distributions to 11,000 beneficiaries throughout the country were completed by the end of the month. As bulk food stocks are used up, distribution is switching to food parcels. Following the influx of 4,600 refugees from neighbouring Montenegro to Shkodra, the distribution of food and non-food relief items to an additional 2,000 refugees began in mid-September.

Support continued during the month to the most vulnerable amongst the estimated 5,000 'visitors' from Kosovo who have entered the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia (FYROM) to escape the fighting in the province. During the month of September, the number of persons receiving assistance (food, hygiene, bedding, medical care, medicines, school supplies, clothing or legal residency help) increased moderately to approximately 257 persons, as the Red Cross worked closely with the UNHCR to respond to needs. A total of 180 persons received relief items directly from the Red Cross, whereas medical care needs were covered by UNHCR.

Distributed during September 1998 (Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia)

Commodity	Quantity
Flour	415 kg
Beans	158 kg
Sugar	89 kg
Oil	84 litres
Baby food	39 pcs
Washing powder	84 packages
Soap	84 pcs
Mattresses	178 pcs
Blankets	348 pcs
Towels	182 pcs
Shampoo	84 pcs
Toothpaste	84 pcs

A reported 6,000 people seeking refuge from the fighting are in Bosnia and Herzegovina, where local Red Cross branches have provided limited relief assistance. Together with the local Red

Cross, the International Federation is currently evaluating the situation to provide an urgently needed response to the outstanding needs of these refugees.

Outstanding needs

Following the launching of the revised Appeal on 28 August, some pledges have been received, however, funds are still urgently needed in order to secure the purchase of food and non-food items for distributions in the months of November and December.

The urgent need for the relocation of refugees out of the insecure border district of Tropoje remains a major concern to the International Federation. Collective centres need to be found as soon as possible to relieve host families of the heavy burden of supporting refugees and to allow assistance to be delivered during the winter months. The need for the Albanian Office of Refugees to register refugees outside Tropoje district is also becoming increasingly urgent. Many refugees are now moving without any reference to or lead from the government or agencies.

External relations - Government/UN/NGOs/Media

The ARC/Federation continue to maintain close contact with other agencies active in the area including the ICRC, UNHCR and WFP. Effective co-ordination continues with UNHCR in Albania on the distribution of non-food items, and in FYROM on responding to the range of needs of the most vulnerable persons from Kosovo. The Albanian government remains unable to establish a secure working environment in Tropoje district which is exacerbating the problem of aid distribution in the area.

Contributions

See Annex 1 for details.

Conclusion

September witnessed a significant increase in the total number of refugees in Albania, following an influx of some 4,600 Kosovo refugees from Montenegro to Shkodra in the middle of the month. It is now expected that over 20,000 refugees will have entered Albania by the end of the year. In spite of increased security concerns during the month and a temporary halt to distributions, co-ordinated distribution mechanisms between the central warehouse and all branches assisting refugees have now been established.

As winter approaches, the urgent need to relocate refugees out of the Tropoje district into a more stable, secure and accessible environment remains a major concern. However action regarding relocation, the identification of collective centres and refugee registration issues remains painfully slow, increasing fears that the aid distribution process will be severely hampered as harsh weather conditions set in and refugee numbers rise further.

In the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, the Red Cross maintains the lead in developing a system for identifying vulnerable groups within the refugee population from Kosovo. Preparedness levels are being maintained in the event of a major increase in movements from

Kosovo. For more information, donors are invited to contact Penny Elghady, Desk Officer on tel: ++ 41 22 730 4319, email: elghady@ifrc.org

Peter Rees-Gildea
Director
Operations Funding and
Reporting Department

Renny Nancholas
Director
Europe Department