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RED CROSS & RED CRESCENT INFORMATION

Report No. 9

This report is published daily as a general update on Red Cross Red Crescent activities during the Balkans crisis, targeting primarily the Movement's components and supporters. Today's text can also be found on the internet: www.ifrc.org and www.icrc.org.

LATEST EVENTS

The President of the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies, Dr Astrid Heiberg and the President of the ICRC, Dr Cornelio Sommaruga, flew out of Geneva this afternoon (Tuesday), for the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia and Albania. There they will visit Red Cross operations, spend some time with refugees from Kosovo, and meet senior officials to discuss humanitarian consequences of the unfolding crisis. Before leaving for the region, the two addressed a one-day operational meeting of 14 National Society representatives in Geneva today, emphasising that independence and co-ordination are crucial for the Movement's current relief operation in the Balkans. Federation President Astrid Heiberg stated that "there is no shortage of support, but if this is not co-ordinated it could become an obstacle and not a help." But, she said, she was pleased to see "we are truly united and working as a Movement". ICRC President Cornelio Sommaruga named "compassion, action and co-ordination" as the guiding factors of the Movement's response to what he termed "a political and social catastrophe with tremendous humanitarian consequences". Expressing concern about NATO's move to provide humanitarian aid within its military command, he urged National Societies to pay particular attention to the image of the Red Cross and respect of the fundamental principle of independence when faced with pressure from their governments. In addition to logistics and coordination issues, tracing and reunification questions and relations with NATO and UNHCR were also addressed.

Federal Republic of Yugoslavia

A Red Cross team has visited several towns in southern and Eastern Serbia (Vranje, Vladicin Han, Surdulica, Leskovac, Nis and Aleksinac) to assess the humanitarian needs of the civilian population following air strikes in the area. As a result, further emergency supplies (including blankets, plastic sheeting and mattresses) will be dispatched to these towns. The Red Cross is addressing the concerns of those anxious for family news, anticipating the further disruption of normal communication systems.

The delivery of disaster preparedness stocks for the National Society - including sleeping bags, torches, candles and water filters - is underway and due for completion this week. These much needed items will enable the Yugoslav Red Cross to continue its humanitarian work even when key utilities such as water and electricity are unavailable.

In conjunction with the National Society, the Federation is presently organising delivery of the first batch of some 750 MT of ECHO food aid for 125,000 refugees from Croatia and Bosnia. The consignment will provide sugar, beans and vegetable oil for this vulnerable group for two months. The first trucks are expected to arrive this week.

Meanwhile, the Yugoslav Red Cross soup kitchen programme is being maintained for 14,000 beneficiaries throughout the country. This vital activity is providing one hot meal per day for people in greatest need.

The Society's Belgrade branch reports that it has been approached by more than 1,000 IDP's in recent days - with more registrations in the pipeline. Currently there are 94 IDP's at a centre in Dedinje, where the Red Cross is providing food and other essentials on a daily basis.

In Vojvodina, the most frequently requested items for Croatian/Bosnian refugees and the local vulnerable population currently not being met by aid agencies include baby food, milk powder, and baby nappies. The influx from Kosovo continues with almost 1,000 arrivals in recent days. Access to fuel is an increasing problem for the local Red Cross which is responsible for trucking drinking water to areas of Novi Sad where the supply has been disrupted.

In Sabac, the local Red Cross has been providing food and hygiene parcels to refugees from Croatia and Bosnia who have had to move for security reasons.

Montenegro

Thousands of displaced people from Kosovo have arrived in Montenegro in the past days, bringing estimated totals to over 40,000. In Rozaje (northern Montenegro), a Red Cross medical assessment has been undertaken of the collective centres housing displaced persons. Medical needs of the displaced were identified and a stock of appropriate medical supplies is being prepared. A stock of 12 dressing sets and two minor surgery sets have already been given to the local health facilities. The Red Cross is currently assessing the tracing needs - to restore family links with relatives - of the displaced in Montenegro.

Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia

Red Cross teams have undertaken assessments in the main refugee camps (Stenkovic, Bojane, Radusa, and Nprosteno). In the Radusa camp, the Red Cross has made an ad-hoc distribution of 216 kg of BP-5 biscuits, 480 lt. of milk 760 lt. of fruit juice and 270 kg of normal biscuits. In Kichevo, medical supplies (dressing material, pediatric and dispensary kits) have been provided to cope with the medical needs of refugees staying in the area.

Yesterday (Monday) the first reunification of families split between two refugee camps took place. Using registration data from Care, Save the Children and NATO forces, the Red Cross was able to identify 10 families divided between the Brazda and Bojane camps. Last night, in the cold rain of the Balkans, the first of these families were reunited amidst hugs, tears and laughter. To date, the ICRC has registered more than 150 unaccompanied children and some 400 adults looking for their children - numbers that are likely to increase rapidly. For countries which received refugees recently from the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, the ICRC has requested National Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies to gather information and details on the families who were separated during the transfers and have not yet been able to contact their relatives left behind. This information will be used by Red Cross teams in the field to trace family members and re-establish a contact.

According to OSCE figures, the refugee population in Macedonia, as of 11 April, numbers 126,240, as follows:

w 46,240 accommodated in camps (tent cities);
w 60,000 accommodated with host families and registered with Macedonian authorities (of which 46,000 are Red Cross beneficiaries);
w 20,000 not registered.

The Macedonian Red Cross (MRC) continues its assistance to 46,000 refugees living with host families. From its two warehouses, the International Federation is despatching food and non-food items to the six refugee camps in Macedonia. The UNHCR registration of the camp populations is due to be finalised later this week.

The voluntary transfer of refugees to third countries is now taking place on a daily basis, though accurate data on the number of departures is proving difficult to obtain. According to official figures, 5,200 refugees have been air-lifted to Germany.

All five International Federation relief delegates assigned to support the eight MRC branches will soon be in place. They will be located in Skopje, Tetovo, Struga, Kicevo and Veles, with an immediate responsibility for assessing MRC branch capacities to respond to the needs.

The Finnish UN transport unit, departing Macedonia shortly, has donated eleven vehicles to the Red Cross / Red Crescent pool. The Finnish Red Cross has offered to cover contract obligations and expenses. Another group of Finnish ex-UN personnel are providing 24 hour lighting to Stenkovic camp, using a generator. Three German Red Cross (GRC) trucks are operational in the area, mainly responding to the field hospital's needs for specialised water from the water purification station.

The GRC field hospital ERU has deployed two ambulances to enable immediate transport of serious medical cases from different camps to its facility or to other hospitals in Skopje. The field hospital has a capacity of 40 beds and two Red Cross health delegates are coordinating their activities. The GRC ERU water purification station is producing 60,000 litres per day. A Kuwait Red Crescent plane loaded with relief supplies is expected to arrive in Skopje this weekend.

Red Cross medical personnel in Macedonia report the health situation is stable with no identified epidemic threat. Mental trauma in children, adults and elderly who fled Kosovo remains the main concern. According to a Red Cross pediatrician, although children playing marbles or football in the camps may show a 'superficial recovery', the care and attention afforded to them should not diminish. Parents who lost their children are experiencing greater difficulty in coping with the situation than the children themselves.

Communications and logistics remain a constraint, with radio links between vehicles and the Red Cross delegation base yet to be established making coordination of movements and the exchange of immediate information extremely difficult. A telecom delegate arrived in Macedonia yesterday and the situation is being addressed as a priority. Customs clearance and airport logistics remains a problem and an airport logistics delegate is being assigned to this task.

Over the weekend, questions were raised within the international community regarding the appointment of a National Society to manage the Bojane camp. While the day-to-day running of the camp remains smooth, the development raises important issues.

Albania

Children separated from their parents are a major concern, although the figures of unaccompanied children are so far not as high as in the Macedonian camps. Nevertheless, due to the constant flow of refugees, identification and registration of unaccompanied children is being carried out by the Red Cross. In addition, tracing requests from parents separated from their children are being collected. Red Cross operations are ongoing. However, no additional information was available from the field.

OUTSTANDING NEEDS

Significant logistics problems are still being encountered. The International Federation and the ICRC advise National Societies that no further unsolicited donations can be accepted by the operation. All donations must be co-ordinated with the Geneva logistics unit.

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