

ALBANIA

REFUGEE INFLUX FROM KOSOVO

24 November 1998

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period covered: 1 October to 31 October 1998

This Situation Report provides an update of Red Cross/Red Crescent efforts to assist refugees from Kosovo in Albania during the month of October, 1998. With the approach of winter, and the fact that about 40,000 refugees remain outside of Kosovo with no early return likely, there is an urgent need to ensure that the supply pipelines for the early part of 1999 are maintained. Financial and in-kind assistance have been sufficient to date, but continued support for the operation is essential.

The context

On 29 May, 1998 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. Following further significant 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.

The movement of refugees south, away from the border area of Tropoje, to the cities of Tirana, Durres, Shkodra, and ten other districts, continues. It is estimated that the number of refugees in Tropoje district has now fallen to below 3,000, although the figures issued at the beginning of the month by the government's office for refugees do not reflect this. The increasingly difficult security situation and the absence of the long-awaited re-registration process have made distribution in the north of the country virtually impossible.

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

Events in neighbouring Yugoslavia dominated the month, with international attention focusing on the shuttle diplomacy of US special envoy Richard Holbrooke in last minute efforts to avert the threat of NATO air strikes. As the Albanian government offered military facilities for use by NATO forces, border guards were placed on high alert and evacuation plans were put in place for the population of the north Albanian city of Kukes.

Although Red Cross distributions of relief items went ahead in the northern district of Tropoje through the local Red Cross branch, the Red Cross informed UNHCR that it would be unable to continue to carry out distribution in the district without the completion of the long awaited re-registration process. The UNHCR's proposal for re-registration utilising photo-ID cards has still not commenced. Security concerns continue in the north, with lorries carrying Federation/ARC relief goods to Tropoje looted during the month, in spite of a police escort. Eight fatalities were reported during the month on the border between Albania and the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (FRY), caused by refugees trying to cross into Albania through mined areas on the Yugoslav side.

The new Socialist-led coalition government of Pandeli Majko was sworn in on 2 October, and the Parliament has voted to put a new draft constitution before a referendum to be held on 22 November.

October also saw the third General Assembly of the Albanian Red Cross, which took place in Tirana from 8-11 October. Both the President, Dr. Subashi, and the Vice-President, Dr. Sula, were re-elected during the assembly, which was addressed by the President of the Republic, Rexhep Medani.

No major increase was witnessed during the month in the number of people from Kosovo entering FYR Macedonia, although a brief peak was noticed in the days leading up to the NATO air strike ultimatum. A letter was sent out by the government to UNHCR and the Macedonian Red Cross concerning the government's decision to provide a status of 'humanitarian assisted cases' to those persons from Kosovo currently accommodated in FYR Macedonia - an estimated 5,000 persons. The registration process - mainly ensuring medical coverage and help with residency problems - is progressing slowly, with those persons who have entered the country illegally reluctant to register at their local police stations.

In Bosnia and Herzegovina, the UNHCR have registered a total of 6,186 refugees from Kosovo (figures up to 4 November 1998), accommodated in 5 camps, although they estimate the actual number is about 10,000 refugees. Of the registered refugees, more than 75% (4,646) are in the canton of Sarajevo, and 1,482 are in transit or located in collective centres (Hadzici/Coca-Cola, Srednje, Petrovac, Kljuc, Tuzla, Zenica).

Red Cross/Red Crescent action

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

Commodity	Items distributed	Date of distribution	Total since operation began
		October 1998	

Hygiene parcels	9,523	24,384
Washing powder	1.1 MT	13 MT
Mattresses	150	8,354
Bed linen sets	8,412	16,353
Tshirts/socks/ underwear set	5,013	5,013
Jogging suits	5,418	5,418

The October distribution did not commence until the end of the National Society’s General Assembly on 11 October. A total of 10,700 beneficiaries in 14 regions of the country received assistance. The planned number of beneficiaries for November is more than 15,000 - the increase reflecting the decision that ARC/Federation will again take responsibility for food distribution to 5,000 refugees in Tirana, following inter-agency negotiations carried out in October. During the month of October, 830 food parcels and 432 hygiene parcels were looted in Tropoje.

Support continued during the month to the most vulnerable amongst the estimated 5,000 'visitors' from Kosovo who have entered the FYR Macedonia. The Red Cross/UNHCR caseload increased moderately over the month, with around 300 persons receiving food, hygiene, bedding, medical care, medicines or legal residency help. From this group, some 222 persons received relief items directly from the Red Cross. The Macedonian Red Cross is also exploring possibilities to increase its image at local and national levels by using free billboard space to promote its activities - particularly in the field of public safety and health.

Commodities distributed during October 1998 (FYR Macedonia)	Quantity
Flour	605 kg
Beans	242 kg
Sugar	121 kg
Oil	136 litres
Baby food	87 pcs
Washing powder	121 packages
Soap	121 pcs
Mattresses	213 pcs
Blankets	430 pcs
Towels	213 pcs
Shampoo	121 pcs
Toothpaste	121 pcs

In Bosnia and Herzegovina, preparations are underway for a new programme of assistance for 4,000 refugees in 4 collective centres, due to start at the beginning of December.

Outstanding needs

Ensuring the supply pipeline for December for food and hygiene parcels remains the main priority for the month of November. In addition, planning is starting for the supply pipeline for the first half of 1999. The ARC, with the support of the Federation, will continue the provision of assistance to 15,000 refugees during the first half of 1999.

The need for the relocation of refugees out of the insecure border district of Tropoje in an organised manner and the provision of collective accommodation becomes increasingly urgent. Without any increase in collective accommodation places, the situation will deteriorate as refugees run out of money to rent private accommodation. The continued failure of the government to act and the inability of UNHCR to make any positive steps is a major source of concern for the Red Cross. The situation, together with security concerns, has been exacerbated to the point of making relief distribution in Tropoje district virtually impossible. It is also essential that a complete registration of all refugees in Albania is undertaken.

External relations - Government/UN/NGOs/Media

The ARC/Federation continue to maintain close contact with other agencies, including the ICRC, UNHCR and WFP, as well as with the Albanian Government. Effective coordination also continues with UNHCR in FYR Macedonia in responding to the range of needs of the most vulnerable persons from Kosovo.

Contributions

See Annex 1 for details.

Conclusion

The need to move refugees out of the Tropoje district to safer locations in other parts of the country and to secure distribution lines remain the focus of Red Cross operations, and pressure continues to be brought on the government and UNHCR to see positive steps in this direction. With the October inter-agency decision that ARC would not distribute food to refugees in Tirana now reversed for November and December, opportunities to increase ARC visibility will receive priority focus.

In FYR Macedonia, the Red Cross maintains the lead in developing a system for identifying vulnerable groups within the population from Kosovo. Preparedness levels are being maintained in the event of a major change in the situation.

The Federation and NS would take this opportunity to thank PNS and Governments for their continued support to the Appeal for Kosovo Refugees; the assistance in October from Norwegian Red Cross for the provision of food parcels and Austrian RC for hygiene parcels is particularly appreciated. With the coming of winter, and

the fact that about 40,000 refugees remain outside of Kosovo with no early return likely, plans are being made to continue the supply pipeline for the early part of 1999. Continued support for the operation is essential.

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