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RED CROSS & RED CRESCENT INFORMATION

Report No. 22

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

Federal Republic of Yugoslavia

Nis region: A joint Red Cross Red Crescent Movement team has visited Surdulica, a small town near Serbia's border with Bulgaria hit by airstrikes earlier in the week. According to preliminary evaluations, 300 houses are severely damaged some completely destroyed (including the home of the local Red Cross branch secretary). Some 2,500 people are in need of food, hygiene, medical assistance, with beds, mattresses and plastic sheeting also in short supply. The families who lost their homes are being accommodated in a local hotel. The regional branch in Nis responded immediately to the emergency in Surdulica by sending two trucks of relief items from their stocks and has opened a telephone help-line for the affected population. The Red Cross is hoping to open a soup kitchen in Surdulica soon, in addition to maintaining its regular programmes.

Today (Friday) Red Cross trucks returned to Surdulica, loaded with plastic sheeting, blankets, and food parcels for delivery to the local branch of the Yugoslav Red Cross.

Vojvodina: The water supply in Novi Sad has yet to be restored and more Red Cross branches in the region are asking for financial support with municipal budgets under pressure. The Red Cross in Novi Sad, Subotica, Sombor and Pancevo are carrying out intensive first aid training for the local population. In Subotica, the branch has organized 11 courses (at 125 Swiss francs each) and trained 355 people to date.

Uzice region: Fuel supply shortages are adversely affecting Red Cross work, hampering day to day tasks and emergency distributions. For instance, at present, the Red Cross branch in Nova Varos delivers bread for 148 refugees living in a collective centre some 40 km from the town but transport difficulties are threatening to put an end to this vital activity.

Uzice region has been impossible to reach by phone for much of this week, though the Red Cross branch has been reconnected through the installation of one new operational telephone line. In Uzice itself, an increased number of social cases is reported with between 20 and 30 new families requesting food assistance from the Red Cross branch each day, adding to an initial list of 550 families considered most vulnerable. Of the city's 50,000 population before the crisis began, an estimated 20,000 inhabitants have moved out to surrounding villages.

The Red Cross branch in Pozega is facing an increased need to expand its soup kitchen programme, currently serving 250 meals a day, seven days a week. Additional meals for 50 social cases are being supplied by local donors.

Montenegro: Official figures for the number of internally displaced stand at around 80,000 people. Though the response to the emergency is satisfactory, Red Cross branches are reporting a variety of needs, including milk powder, individual parcels, baby food, canned food, oil, sugar, mattresses and blankets. Relief distributions are proceeding smoothly, but the shortage of warehouse space and trucking capacities are causing difficulties. At a recent humanitarian task force meeting, agreement was reached with the main food donors to maintain the month's planning figure for internally displaced at 80,000

Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia

According to latest UNHCR figures, an estimated 7,500 new refugees arrived in FYROM on Thursday (29 April) through the Blace, Jazince, Tabanovce and Lojane border crossings. This marks a dramatic increase in the number of new arrivals from the past week. Some of the refugees come from the Bujanovac/Presevo area, a region adjacent to Kosovo, which is part of Serbia proper. Since the area is close to the Macedonian border, the new arrivals often already have friends or relatives in the Albanian villages in Macedonia and prefer not to be registered or sent to the camps.

Several ministries yesterday expressed their displeasure at the slowness of the humanitarian evacuations of refugees to third countries. About 1,300 refugees departed to third countries on Thursday. The destinations included Austria, Belgium, Denmark, France, the Netherlands, Norway, Spain, Turkey and the UK.

Relief Distributions: The number of refugees living with host families and registered with the Macedonian Red Cross has risen substantially yet again to over 101,000. More than 58,700 beneficiaries had received aid through Thursday (29 April). The number of Red Cross beneficiaries initially planned for has doubled in some branches (Skopje, Tetovo, Kumanovo) and tripled in others (Debar, Gostivar, Struga).

Shelter: The refugees camp population has burgeoned beyond capacity - 65,000 people have been registered by the Macedonian Red Cross in the six camps near Skopje. Overcrowding will be lessened somewhat by the new camp that opened yesterday in Cegrane, initially providing shelter for 5,600 refugees.

Health: Red Cross field hospital staff are continuing their participation in the vaccination campaign, organized for refugee children in the camps, yesterday (Thursday) in the Stenkovec-Brazda camp. The second delivery of a baby, by Caesarean section, was carried out in the field hospital on Thursday. Several delegates, including the HoD, visited the new camp in Cegrane to ensure space was available for the requested Norwegian Red Cross referral hospital. MSF is operating an out-patient dispensary in the camp.

Logistics: Warehouse dispatches on Thursday (29 April) included: 2,000 mattresses, 1,000 hygiene parcels and 5,000 blankets to Skopje city branches; and 3,456 hygienic parcels and 2,000 blankets to the Tetovo branch. Incoming goods to the warehouse included the American Red Cross donation of 113 tents, 6,686 blankets and 644 hygiene parcels.

The logistics and relief departments have been working on initiatives to deliver a rapid response capability for the Red Cross to provide emergency aid to groups of refugees who have crossed the border but have not been registered with authorities and thus are not yet eligible for humanitarian assistance (groups which remain in the buffer zone receive Red Cross assistance through the ICRC). A 20-foot container will be pre-loaded with blankets, sleeping mats, soap, meals ready to eat, canned fish, meat paste, biscuits, infant formula, fruit juice, milk, and drinking water. Upon verification of needs by a field team, the container will be loaded onto a truck for rapid delivery to vulnerable groups.

Tracing: Red Cross tracing activities are continuing and arrangements for reuniting family members has been made easier with the provision of two minibuses from the delegation's vehicle fleet on Wednesday. Cross-checking of data is ongoing and duplicate registrations are being eliminated. The number of files opened for children through Thursday (29 April) totals 376, while the number of files for parents searching for their children has decreased to 928, after removal of duplicate registrations. The number of cases closed has increased significantly to 121, and a further 23 are pending.

External Relations, Information and Publicity: International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement delegates conducted interviews or briefings with the following media on Thursday (29 April): Fox TV, NBC, Cox Newspapers, Chicago Sun Times, National Public Radio (US), APTN, CBS, Reuters, Macedonian TV, AFP, TFI, ITN, Sky News, Non Profit Times and Stars and Stripes newspapers, a Chicago radio station, BBC World, a Montreal radio station (CJAD), CBC Radio, Seattle Times newspaper, Norwegian national TV, LA Times, Elle magazine and the Makedonija Denes daily newspaper.

The Acting President of the American Red Cross visited Red Cross Red Crescent operations in FYROM on Thursday (29 April).

Albania

According to the Republic of Albania's Emergency Management Group (EMG), the number of refugees in the country remains at approximately 357,000, including 97,000 in Kukes, the main point of entry from the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia.

Relief distributions: Distributions to villages surrounding Tirana are continuing and should be completed over the weekend. Some 800 elderly have not collected their rations: efforts are being made to reach these beneficiaries who will receive the supplementary ration for the elderly, in addition to the normal distribution. In Tirana some 4,600 food parcels have been dispensed in recent days, while projected beneficiary numbers for forthcoming distributions exceed 25,000.

The following deliveries have been effected in recent days: 50 stoves for collective centres in Elbasan, without the means to prepare food for the refugees; 40 MT of wheat flour, 200 kg of used clothing, 1,000 hygiene parcels, 800 diapers, 2,700 blankets to Kukes; 7,385 food parcels (5 kg) provided by the French Red Cross to Durres; and food parcels provided by Red Cross Societies in Belgium (4,032/3.3 kg), France (5,795/5 kg) and Spain (3,000/10 kg) to Fier.

Health: Establishment of the basic health clinic in Shkodra is being delayed due to logistics constraints. However, tents and other supplies should arrive today (Friday). The water-sanitation situation in the cigarette factory in the town will also be assessed. The joint delegation's health staff will meet shortly with the respective authorities to review the cooperation and identify particular area where the Movement can help.

Logistics: Another 22 trucks with relief goods have been released from customs and are now able to reach their intended delivery points. Due to the shipping schedules and the condition of some of the incoming goods, a number of trucks have had to be stationed at Tirana airport for extended periods of time, which has slowed the overall distribution.

Telecommunications: The ICRC has requested more landlines and is planning to install satellite communication at the joint delegation headquarters, which would provide eight additional satellite links. The Austrian telecoms ERU has completed its task in Shkodra.

Tracing: The field tracing teams report an ever-increasing number of children, accompanied by family members (often elderly grandparents, unable to provide the necessary support) but separated from their parents. The delegation's tracing department is widening its criteria and accepting tracing and family reunion requests in these cases, as well. On average, 70 to 80 people per day visit the delegation's tracing department.

PARTICIPATING NATIONAL SOCIETIES: A second meeting of all Participating National Societies (PNS) was held yesterday (Thursday). The main topics of discussion were security, the involvement of the military and the concept of a memorandum of understanding between the Albanian Red Cross, the joint delegation and the PNSs.

A delegation from the Swiss Red Cross arrived to start its assessment of the situation in Albania. Members of the "Palestinian Red Crescent Society" have met with Albanian health ministry officials to discuss assistance for the country's health institutions. Four National Societies have indicated their plans for visiting Albania in the coming week.

EXTERNAL RELATIONS, Information and Publicity: Interviews were held yesterday (Thursday) with Fox News (America), Swiss Radio International, Channel 4 (Italy) and the Australian Broadcasting Corporation. The initial cooperative efforts with the Spear Albania project - which is carried over Radio Tirana - are proving to be an excellent method of providing information to the refugees.

Outstanding needs: Poor communications between the joint delegation and the shipping point in Italy is hampering the flow of information regarding incoming shipments, creating significant difficulties for the Albanian Red Cross and resulting in some negative publicity. Efforts are being made to address the problem. The delegation is also considering the local purchase of computer equipment.

Bosnia Herzegovina

The first reception point for newly arrived refugees from the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (FRY) to Bosnia Herzegovina (BH) was opened earlier this week, by the Red Cross of Sarajevo Canton (Federation of Bosnia Herzegovina) at the city's main bus station. The intention is to provide refugees with sandwiches and milk or tea, and with information upon their arrival.

The reception point is open for beneficiaries from 10h00 to 22h00 every day with a daily capacity of 300 sandwiches and 80 litres of milk. Similar reception points are to be opened throughout BH entry points for refugees from FRY; the American Red Cross has offered to donate cash for provision of food and beverages at such reception points.

On Wednesday (28 April) UNHCR organised a follow up meeting with all major international humanitarian organisations, (including the Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement) to continue the discussion on contingency planning for the expected number of refugees.

The Red Cross community in BH (including the Red Cross in both entities, the International Federation and the ICRC) have created a steering group, not only to integrate the Movement's assistance activities but also to coordinate their humanitarian efforts with BH Government, UNHCR and Red Cross Red Crescent PNS present in BH.

A new plan of action for assistance for 50,000 FRY refugees over six months was prepared earlier this month and is now being implemented for registered refugees, living either with host families or in government centres.

The assistance will comprise food and hygiene parcels, supplementary food, blankets and operational costs for the Red Cross in both entities. Of the planned caseload of 50,000 refugees, some 4,000 are situated in asylum centres (all in the Federation of Bosnia Herzegovina), while others are with host families in both entities (30,000 in the Federation of Bosnia Herzegovina, and 15,000 in Republika Srpska).

Platform for European Red Cross Cooperation for Refugees, Asylum-seekers and Migrants

The National Red Cross Societies of the European Union and Switzerland are involved in providing humanitarian assistance to refugees on a domestic, as well as international, level. This assistance includes health as well as social and psychological support, shelter, as well as legal advice, restoration of family links and the effecting of family reunion and a range of other services. National Societies fulfill an auxiliary role to their governments in the reception of refugees in accordance with the obligations of the Red Cross Red Crescent Movement.

Yesterday (29 April) representatives of National Red Cross Societies from the European Union and Switzerland involved in or responsible for the domestic reception and accommodation of refugees met in Geneva. The following statement was adopted at the meeting:

"Through the Movement's experience with population movements throughout the world and through the network of national Red Cross and Red Crescent societies, we are aware of the difficulties of families being split up and the misery and distress that this causes. The Red Cross Red Crescent Movement is working throughout Europe to restore family links and effect family reunification of people displaced from the Balkans and, further, is happy to offer its considerable expertise and existing network of national societies to facilitate the process on behalf of governments and other organisations.

Governments are urged to use all efforts to ensure the unity of the family and to establish flexible mechanisms allowing displaced families to be reunited, whether the displacement is a result of the conflict or the evacuation process, and to facilitate transfers between host countries.

Satisfaction was expressed at the generous offer by several countries to receive refugees from the Balkans who are in need of protection and humanitarian assistance. However, governments are urged to maintain a flexible and humanitarian response to the continuing needs of these people. Governments are further urged to give particular attention to the most vulnerable including the mentally ill, the physically ill, the disabled, the elderly, unaccompanied minors rejoining families, single women as well as families with infants, in the process of the humanitarian evacuation.

Whilst the seriousness of the situation of the Balkans is acknowledged, the Red Cross Red Crescent Movement urges governments to bear in mind that other regions of the world are also facing serious refugee and displacement problems and to maintain protection and humanitarian assistance for those people."

Outstanding needs

According to latest information from the Geneva logistics unit, among urgently needed items under the joint appeal mechanism are: food parcels, hygiene parcels, buckets, kitchen sets, blankets, flour, candles and folding jerry cans. An initial list of contributions to the joint appeal (cash and kind) is being prepared for dispatch to donors in the coming days.

Meanwhile logistics coordination remains essential, and the International Federation and the ICRC advise National Societies that no unsolicited in-kind donations can be accepted by the operation. All in-kind donations must be co-ordinated with the Geneva logistics unit:

Contact names/numbers: Charles Bernimolin, Federation, and John Wert, ICRC, at:

Phone: +41 22 730 2143 or +41 22 730 2204;

Fax: +41 22 730 2876;

email: fedicrcbalkanlog.gva@icrc.org

For further information from the International Federation, please contact Leopoldo Principe for the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia and Bosnia & Herzegovina; tel: +41 22 730 4439; email: principe@ifrc.org and Penny Elghady for Albania and Macedonia; tel: +41 22 730 4319; email: elghady@ifrc.org

For further information from the ICRC, contact External Resources Department; tel: +41 22 734 6001) or Pierre Kraehenbuehl (tel: +41 22 730 2256, email: pkraehenbuehl.gva@icrc.org

Renny Nancholas
Director
Europe Department
International Federation of Red Cross
and Red Crescent Societies

Angelo Gnaedinger
Delegate General for Europe,
Middle East, and North America
ICRC