



On the Record: Civil Society in Kosovo - the Crisis Years

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From the AP Editorial Desk by Iain Guest

During the late 1990s, some young Albanians grew restive and impatient with the campaign of non-violent resistance and began to turn to the Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA). The Serbian regime's response was furious and violent. In February 1998, Serbian forces attacked several villages in the region of Drenica, to the west of Prishtina [Pristina]. This ushered in a year of growing violence, brutality, and displacement.

Not surprisingly, this put enormous pressure on the civil associations described in the last issue. Tens of thousands of people were displaced, creating a major humanitarian burden that fell squarely on the parallel society. Their response is the subject of this issue, which also includes extracts from Peter's 1998 diaries and field reports and assessments by organizations working in the area.

The Rebirth of Civil Society in Kosovo

From Peter's diary:

Drenica is an area west of Prishtina. Around 10 villages there were surrounded and attacked by the Serbian special police forces (MUP) at the beginning of this month. Around 80 people were killed, including many women and children. Of 46 that were buried two days ago, there were 14 women and 12 children. The Serbian government has promoted this as an "anti-terrorist" campaign, but it was pure terrorism.

An American I met here went out to Drenica yesterday and today and found bombed and burned-out houses. People are still hiding in the woods there; afraid to go back to whatever homes they have left. Five thousand Albanians have fled to Montenegro and others to Macedonia, but most are staying.

One of the few options people here have is to do what they did today, that is, create mass public events. People have lost their fear of police violence. Public protests keep the issues in the press, which helps put pressure on the government. I don't really believe the repression will end here as long as Milosevic is in power, but nonviolent action might mitigate the repression. The student leadership is just finding its way, but it has much support. Ibrahim Rugova, the president of the

parallel government, is also popular, but he has been losing popularity because of his inactivity. He has a reputation for not having done anything for the last seven years. As one of our young translators said, "There is passive non-violence and active non-violence. Only the latter can make a difference."

Today the demonstration took place. It was located on a grassy area on a hillside. This was wise, because it was safe from any attack by cars or tanks. The whole hillside was covered with people, as many as a hundred thousand. There were a few speeches. It lasted only around an hour. People of all ages were there. Signs: "We are not terrorists." "Drenica, we are with you." "Serb police out of Kosovo." "Peace, Freedom, and Independence." "NATO: S.O.S."

As it turned out, there was no problem with police violence. There were not even any police around, except for a couple on the route downtown where we subsequently marched. I think there is really too much international attention on Kosovo at this point for the police to use violence against the students.

...In the evening we went to visit the Media Project. This is a group of young women who, with the guidance of some older women, learn journalism. Aferdita Kelmendi is one of the counselors. We met with about 8 of the 30-odd women in the group. The atmosphere is one of mutual motivation. The women talked about gaining self-confidence through the friendship and support they received from each other. On the wall was a big slogan in English: "I want. I know. I can." The dominant idea was to improve oneself in order to change the world.

The women of the Media Project work together on the magazine "Eritrea." They learn graphics, layout, photojournalism, and writing. They also have classes in conflict resolution. I asked if they received harassment from paternalistic men. One of them brushed this off, "Oh, those are just people who have nothing to do."

Aferdita said, "I don't believe the propaganda about the 'terrorists.' I have never seen the KLA. Serbian television shows police cars with bullet holes in them, but where are the terrorists? I'll tell you where they are. If I go to sleep every night knowing that the police can break into my apartment, and disturb my family and my children, that's psychological terrorism."

March 13, 1998 – End of diary excerpt

When Albanians speak of "the war," they are referring not only to Serbian outrages during the NATO campaign, but to the entire period after the Serbian attack on the villages in the Drenica area west of Prishtina in February and March of last year.

In this first major military campaign, Serbian forces attempted to put an end to the disorganized, nascent military resistance known as the KLA. Over 80 people, mostly civilian villagers including women, children, and the elderly, were killed during this offensive. Around 20 villages were attacked and burned, and most of their inhabitants fled for the woods in fear of their lives.

This first offensive was characteristic of what came to be an intermittent, one-sided campaign against the KLA over the next year. By the end of 1998 it resulted in over 250,000 displaced

persons, hundreds of destroyed villages, and a drastic deterioration of the human rights situation. The offensive was also indirectly aimed at the parallel social structure of Kosovo. While the international community issued threats and mild sanctions against the Serbian regime, the nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) that constituted Kosovo's parallel society had to adjust to wartime conditions in which their operations were severely curtailed and their activists were in danger, at times, for their very lives.

In the face of this heightened repression, in which any Albanian could be labeled a "terrorist," activists bravely continued their work. City-based organizations oriented their operations towards the villages, where people were hardest hit by the offensives. Human rights organizations had their hands full documenting the latest abuses. The independent student union dropped its attempt at "non-political" activism and demonstrated in solidarity with Drenica.

As Melihate Juniku of the Center for the Protection of Women And Children told me, "This was a psychological war." The underground schools were disrupted during this period, and many of the alternative clinics, particularly those in the countryside, were shut down. Mother Teresa's ability to deliver relief goods and medicines was severely curtailed, as its workers were harassed, arrested, and even killed. Relief supplies were routinely confiscated.

The Center for the Protection of Women and Children, like many other NGOs, also had to cope with the influx of displaced villagers into the cities. Juniku continued, "The number of children in school kept decreasing. We tried to encourage children to return to school. We were also trying to teach young mothers how to raise their children. We offered pediatric and gynecological services, as well as pedagogical and psychological counseling."

The following is a field report from the Center for the Protection of Woman and Children, Prishtina, Kosova, written by Sevdie Ahmeti, human rights activist and director of the Center. The field report assessed the situation of villages in the municipality of Klina, in northwest Kosovo, during November and December 1998 and January and February 1999.

Village: BOKSHIQ

By mid-December 1998, this village had 374 people back home out of a previous total of 980. It had 42 IDPs. Residents usually used the services of the clinic in Grabanice village, which is destroyed. The population is traumatized. Out of 136 houses, 86 of them are burned to ashes. Only elder people can travel with minimum problems as the police checkpoints are frequent on the way to Klina. Needs are serious in food, blankets, clothes and mattresses. Water is being used from springs, otherwise water wells are poisoned. This village has 3 checkpoints and loud explosions can be heard over the nights. At short notice, people are ready to leave as the situation is deteriorating. The Dolove-Kpuz road is mined. Gunfire is heard overnight.

Village: CESKOVE

As of the end of January 1999, only 8 families are back home. Others are expected to return as soon as they feel secure. Out of the total number of 59 houses, only 11 of them can be inhabited, and 35 are completely destroyed. Needs of the population are in food, shoes, blankets, bedding,

winter clothes, and heating; 68 water wells are contaminated and only 2 can be used after they have been cleared. Circulation of the residents is limited. They can move as far as the villages of Jabllanice, Kpuz, and Bokshiq. Police shoot at night from their nearby positions from time to time. Villagers are intimidated and they are trapped.

Village: CUPEVE E ULET

By the end of November 1998, this village had 350 people back home out of 430 before. It had 50 IDPs [internally displaced persons]. Most of the residents were suffering from scabies, diarrhea, TB [Tuberculosis], and flu. All of them have psychosomatic problems. The village is situated 7 km away from Klina, and any need to reach Klina is obstructed by the police. Out of 20 houses, some 90% of them are destroyed. Food usually used to be collected from Klina, but the police make problems. All animals of the village are gone. Everything is burned, needs are serious in all kinds. The quality of water wells is uncertain. Fighting is reported at night. Heat cannot be assured, because residents cannot go to the woods as heavy police is present in the area. The population is complaining about the behavior of their Serb neighbors in the neighboring village.

Village: GJURGJEVIK

By early November 1998, this village had 500 people who returned back out of a total of 1200 residents of the village. It has some 30 IDPs. Population suffers from hypertension and disorders. Out of 140 houses, only 13 of them remain intact, 23 of them destroyed and the rest is damaged to a greater degree. Needs are serious in food, clothes, and mattresses. Some water wells are poisoned with oil, detergent, and dead animals. Population is surrounded by police checkpoints, although there is no police in the village. They face frequent night shooting and are afraid to travel outside the village. The village does not have electricity. There is a sizeable police and military presence.

Village: PERCEVE

By the end of December 1998, this village had 1600 people back and 300 IDPs. Out of 118 houses of the village, 24 of them are completely destroyed, but 90% of the houses are damaged. Electricity was not available to the residents until two days ago. Needs of the population are serious in food and clothing. People are very afraid to use the water wells. They are afraid of the Yugoslavian Army movement around the village. The whole population sleeps rough in the open frequently because of the fear of army attacks on them.

Village: VOLLJAKE

By the beginning of February 1999, this village had half the population back, 750 out of 1400 before the war. It had 22 IDPs. Out of approximately 110 houses, only 6 houses are completely intact. The whole community lives in some 50 houses, the other 50 houses are empty as the people are too afraid to come back. Some of the houses are repaired. Needs of the population are in everything. They are facing continuous intimidation from the shooting that reportedly goes on from the bauxite factory where the Serb forces are deployed ever since the summer offensive.

Military forces want the people move from the village. Movement is limited. (End of field report.)

During this period, the Council for the Defense of Human Rights and Freedoms raised charges against the Serbian regime in the war crimes tribunal at The Hague. It supplied witnesses from its network of informants during visits of tribunal investigators.

The Humanitarian Law Center also contributed to the investigations. A staff member described the conditions of her work after Drenica: "We were the first investigators in Prekaz (a village in Drenica) after the massacres last year. We saw all kinds of things, the worst, right after the fighting. From March to May of last year was the worst time to be traveling. We were at risk both from the police and the KLA. It was easier for women to travel. The KLA got used to us and allowed us passage. With the Serbian police, we just lied about where we were going."

The Humanitarian Law Center's staff of lawyers and other trained professionals continued to monitor trials. We were told, "All of the trials took place in the same way. Suspects were beaten and subjected to electroshock, often detained without food. All the European rights conventions were violated. Suspects were deprived of the right to send letters or have contact with relatives. Visits from lawyers were only allowed in the presence of guards."

"Between January 1998 and February 1999 there were 2,400 political imprisonments. In that period we were aware of three deaths from torture in Ferizaj (Urosevac) and five more in Prizren.

"Anyone who came from an area where there was fighting could be accused of being a 'terrorist.' We observed a trial of a 95-year-old man who was senile. We never saw KLA soldiers on trial. People who were on the bus going shopping could be arrested. Often their trials were based on forced admissions. In the cities, intellectuals and students were arrested. Sometimes they were arrested because they had relatives in the KLA.

"Activists such as Fatima Boshniaku, director of Mother Teresa in Gjakova [Djakovica], were targeted. Boshniaku was accused of terrorism. She spent seven months in jail, and was released two weeks before the NATO intervention."

The League of Albanian Women opened the Center for the Rehabilitation of Women and Children in March 1998, after the massacres at Drenica began. Zahidi Zeqire, one of the organization's founders, told me, "Women began to come to our center to sleep and to get food. OXFAM and the ICRC [International Committee of the Red Cross] helped us, as did Save the Children and ADRA [Adventist Development and Relief Agency].

"During this period we worked non-stop. We were one of the only organizations that worked in the field. We cared for around 300 children of the Jashari, Ahmeti, and Sejdiu families from Drenica. They were all here. They slept at relatives' houses, and came here for help by day. Some of them eventually went home and some went abroad. Since March of 1998, over 400 pregnant women stayed here and gave birth. Only one of their children died.

Flora Brovina, pediatrician and human rights activist, was another founder of this organization. (Editor's note: Imprisoned by the Serbian police during the NATO intervention, Brovina remains in a jail in Serbia, prohibited from communicating with her friends and colleagues.) During the

Drenica offensive and afterwards, she worked in the woods with the displaced villagers. She also helped to organize a solidarity march, during which thousands of women set out from Prishtina carrying bread for the families hiding in the woods without food. The march was stopped and turned around by the Serbian police.

Igo Rogova of Motrat Qiriazhi told me, "After the massacres at Drenica we thought, 'We can't just sit around.' So we started working with families that were displaced from Drenica to Mitrovica. In Mitrovica we organized women's meetings and psychosocial programs. We organized games and drawing sessions for the children.

"One problem was that many displaced families could not get assistance. Some of them would not seek aid because they were ashamed. With funding that we received, we gave families cash grants of 100 DM a month for six months."

From Peter's diary:

Fifteen women work at the Center for the Protection of Women and Children, putting in long days. They receive 50 to 70 visitors a day and two workshops are held a week, on such things as contraception and sexually transmitted diseases. There are up to 60 people attending each workshop, and many of the junior and senior high school students have come through the Center.

The Center organizes protests, and lobbies on human rights. It serves both Albanian and Serbian women. There has been some discomfort on the part of the Albanians when Serbians come to the Center, but this tension has decreased. Vjosa said she considered it a success that Serbian women, who have access to better care than the Albanians, would come into the Center.

Vjosa said that women and children were the most vulnerable in Kosovar society. She told us that she was the first doctor fired from the hospital, on August 13, 1990. Around 2,300 were fired, and since then Albanian women have been afraid to go to the hospital. We were told that 72% of working people had been fired from their jobs. People are hard pressed to afford medical services.

Fewer than 3% of women are currently working, according to Vjosa. Women make up 38% of college graduates, but most are at home; the Center is trying to help them. Among other problems, there is an increase in domestic violence, as men's frustration rises. Women have few choices in how to deal with this problem, since they don't have their own money and the law doesn't protect them.

It is difficult for outside donors to get supplies through to Kosovo, because much of it may be stolen by the police. The Mother Teresa clinic is one of the few institutions receiving any supplies. We were given some medical statistics: 26 people died from polio in 1996: infant mortality among Albanians is estimated to be around 50 per 1,000, but it is probably higher;

sexually transmitted diseases are on the rise, as is teenage pregnancy (This refers to pregnancy among young married women as pregnancy among unmarried women is rare.); the birth rate is higher because more women are at home with less to do; there has been a 1/3 dropout rate from high school for young women; and more than half the population is under the age of 19.

The Center is harassed by police, who park in front of its door and frighten clients. I sat by the computer, listening to Vjosa. On the screen was a list of Drenica refugees who needed places to stay. Vjosa told us she thought that all Kosovo should become a demilitarized area.

As we left we learned that an 11-year-old boy from Drenica had just shown up. Both of his parents had been killed, and he had escaped by walking alone through the woods. (March 16, 1998)

We met with Mary from Balkan Peace Teams (BPT) this morning. The organization has one team in Belgrade and two in Croatia.

BPT monitors human rights in Serbia and comes to Prishtina each month. It works to get Serbians and Albanians talking to each other. There has been some success with this, but it is a risky proposition for the Albanians.

Mary spent some time evaluating the student movement, criticizing them for failure to speak to the Serbians. She thought they should at least have some of their signs in Serbian, so people can understand what the demands are. Certainly it would be good if Serbians could have more alternative information about the conditions the Albanians are living under, because they are (mostly) terribly indoctrinated. But it is risky for Albanians to reach out to the Serbs at this point, because of the potential for being ostracized by their own people. (March 17, 1999)

I went with David Hartsough to the office of Koha Ditore, the local independent daily Albanian newspaper, to meet with its editor, Veton Surroi. We sat in Veton's office with him and a co-editor, Ylber Hysa. Veton seems to be even busier than the other journalists these days. He is a quiet, serious man with a low voice. He did not waste words. David was asking about possibilities for action, trying to feel out the situation. Veton, speaking of the students' indecision, said, "There is a leadership vacuum. The students need to move. When you jump into the water, you don't look to see whether it's hot or cold first."

Speaking of what was needed to help Kosovo, Veton said that troops should be gathered around Serbia's borders. David asked if he meant NATO troops. Veton said, "Who else? The Warsaw Pact?" (March 18, 1999)

Lepa Mladjenovic is an activist in the Belgrade organization Autonomous Women's Center against Sexual Violence. This organization has been a strong supporter of independent activist organizations in Kosovo. Mladjenovic posted the following assessment of the situation in Kosovo on the Internet on August 31, 1998.

"The situation in Kosovo is very bad. Three days ago the first rain and bad weather started, and more than 100,000 Albanian people are 'under the sky', in woods and bushes. Many of us

activists as well had a hard time sleeping that night.

"This morning a feminist and pediatrician, Vjosa Dobruna, from the Center for Protection of Women and Children was here in Belgrade and was very tired. Her eyes are now on the edge of tears. Vjosa, like all the other activists in Kosovo is all the time on the spot – in the woods and so on, with humanitarian aid and medical equipment. Many women who are giving birth are dying afterwards, and many children are sick. She also said that many people have recently been put in prison, among them some women activists and as well three women students from the Independent Student Union. The three students were sentenced to three months in prison 'because they gave first aid courses to people.'

"Vjosa also said that she is very sad for the fact that Albanian politics in Kosovo, of peaceful conflict resolution that they have patiently cherished for 8 years, following the precious politics of Ghandi, ended with war and catastrophe!"

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The following statistics come from Albanian sources:

"Near 1000 killed, over 800 missing or held hostage, over 400 settlements and villages destroyed, over 14,000 buildings ruined, over 380,000 Albanians displaced or made refugees. The makeup of IDPs: 63% children, 25% women, and 12% men of different ages.

"Three-hundred-and-fifty villages have been destroyed completely, together with Decan and Rahovec. Over 25% of the population of Kosova is faced with a humanitarian catastrophe. The needs of IDPs and the whole endangered population are: food, shelter, clothing, medicine, health care, and hygienic supplies."