



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

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**Contents**

- **From the AP Editorial Desk**
- **The Birth and Rebirth of Civil Society in Kosovo: Part Three: Expulsion and Exile**
- **Portraits of Exile by Peter Lippman**

**From the AP Editorial Desk by Iain Guest**

In March of this year, the international community attempted to negotiate a settlement to the Kosovo crisis at the Rambouillet summit in France. The meeting ended without agreement, and Serbia began a large build-up of troops in Kosovo. Two weeks later, NATO started a massive bombing campaign against Serbian targets that was intended to force Serbia to comply with the Rambouillet agreement.

The Serbian regime immediately began to expel Albanians from their homes en masse. This resulted in the near-total displacement of Kosovo's Albanian population, with almost a million refugees ending up in neighboring countries. While NATO bombers flew overhead, Serbian police, army, and paramilitary units went from house to house in "Operation Horseshoe" and drove the residents out of villages, towns, and some cities. Terrified Albanians came streaming across the borders into Macedonia, Albania, and Montenegro bearing reports of extreme brutality.

There was very little that the local organizations of Kosovo – already severely curtailed after one year of war – could do to continue their functions. Indeed, most local activists also became refugees. The few who did not were marked people for the next three months. Not all of them survived.

The Serbian authorities set about ridding Kosovo of "undesirables," by which they meant professionals who were helping to hold the Albanian community together and provide essential services. In one typical example, reported by an Albanian press service, Serb police detained a doctor and six nurses at a hospital, bundled them into a vehicle, and drove them to the border before they had even had a chance to contact their families.

It was a devastating experience, more ironic for the fact that it was occurring in the heart of Europe, which had given birth to international refugee law after the Second World War. Middle-class people from Kosovo suddenly found themselves uprooted from their homes, packed into cattle trucks that were reminiscent of the Nazi death camps, taken to the border and forced to walk through minefields to reach the comparative safety of Macedonia.

But the Macedonians were anything but welcoming. Worried that the influx of so many Albanians would destabilize the delicate ethnic balance inside Macedonia itself, they kept the refugees at the border crossing of Blace. Blace quickly became a byword for misery. Refugees were forced to live in the open, amidst the mud and filth for several days. The Macedonians then emptied the camp overnight without informing international agencies. Families were split up, adding further to the trauma.

Under pressure from the international community, the Macedonians yielded and permitted the construction of refugee camps – while making intensive efforts to force the refugees to continue on to Albania. Albanians, meanwhile, opened their homes to the Kosovars who streamed across the border. By late May, the number of refugees in Albania and Macedonia had risen past 800,000 – close to half the entire population of Kosovo.

There was, however, a positive – even uplifting – aspect of this crisis in the response of Kosovo's parallel society. Scores of individuals, who were themselves displaced, regrouped and served their compatriots in the refugee camps and exile communities. Women's organizations set up medical and counseling services, human rights organizations continued their investigations of abuses, and relief groups served those in need in a new venue. Those organizations that continued to operate inside Kosovo, like Mother Teresa, forged relationships with organizations in the surrounding countries, such as El Hilal in Macedonia.

In this issue – the third in their series – Peter picks up the story of the groups he and Teresa met in Kosovo and profiles their efforts to survive the exodus. They provide an inspiring portrait of the spirit that is often generated by "humanitarian" crises, but rarely recognized by aid agencies.

### **Portraits of Exile**

Many activists tried to stick out the bombing in Kosovo, only to be expelled. Binak Ulaj of the Council for the Defense of Human Rights and Freedoms told me: "Our telephone was cut before the bombing, but we continued to work for another week, until March 31. At that time, we experienced the same fate as many other people: we were expelled to Macedonia. The police came to my flat and ordered me to leave. They told me to leave my door open. We didn't know where we were being taken, nor why we were being forced to leave. There was no time to prepare to leave.

"We were taken to the train station. Others were deported in buses and trucks. We were held at the Prishtina [Pristina] train station for three days. In one train car, 18 meters long, there were 150 people. It was difficult to breathe. What troubled me the most was the crying of the children. They wanted water."

Igo Rogova of Motrat Qiriazhi told me the story of her expulsion to Macedonia and of her organization's work there. "We did not believe that NATO was going to bomb Serbia. I was staying in my mother's house and there was great fear.

"We had contact with some women's groups in Belgrade: the Autonomous Women's Center and Women in Black. Lepa Mladjenovic called me every night and said, 'Get out of Kosovo.' I said,

'I'm not getting out of here until they throw me out.'

"We were all thrown out on day 10 of the bombing. The police came with guns and made us go to the train station. We took the train to Blace at the border with Macedonia. It was incredible. This is a separate story from the work of Motrat Qiriazhi. When I got there, it was drizzling. There were around 50,000 people sitting in the mud, waiting to go into Macedonia. We were thrown out of our houses with guns and the Macedonian police welcomed us with guns.

"I love people, and I had so much feeling in my heart for these people when I arrived and saw them the way they were. When I arrived at Blace, I realized that my cell phone worked. I started calling the international organizations, to tell them what was going on. But no one was allowed into Blace except the Bulgarians, Macedonians, and Russians. Someone from UNICEF came to get me out of there. I refused to go, because I had this tool in my hand with which to help people. I stayed at Blace for five days.

"I was going around to different families, saying hello, trying to smile with them. I gave information to NBC regularly, and to different Albanian journalists. For example, I told how many people died, how many babies were born, and how many of them died. A woman died giving birth in the mud.

"I was trying to encourage people. I organized gymnastics sessions with children in the rain. These things gave hope to people, and made them smile. People came to look to me as a leader.

"By the third day I was there, there were 100,000 people at Blace. Some of us held meetings every day. Someone came to me and said that people wanted to hold a protest the next day. So I started to call journalists and let them know about it. We decided to start walking towards the border, all of us with our bags in our hands. If they stopped us, we would simply stand there for one hour.

"I called journalists, friends, and political parties to tell them of our plans. Then at 9:00 the next morning, I received a call from someone in Macedonia, whose name I can't reveal. He told me, 'Tell them to stop this plan, because it could start World War III. Call it off, or people will be killed.'

"At 10:00, the Macedonian special police surrounded us. They were checking their guns. I started to panic. But people were getting their bags ready to carry. I talked to the other leaders. At 12:00, we just stood, instead of trying to walk. We didn't shout, or say anything. We stood that way for 30 minutes, and then sat down.

"It was a success. The journalists took photographs of us from across the border. The police had come to beat us, but they didn't. Our action did not fail, because it was visible to the world. In the evening someone said, 'Things are going to change tomorrow. They will start moving us into Macedonia, into camps.' I'm sure our action helped make this happen.

"On the telephone, NBC asked me, 'Who are you angry at?' I said, 'I'm angry at everyone who knows what is happening and is not doing anything to get us out of here: NATO, the

Macedonians, and the West.' They all knew. NBC wanted me to say I was angry with the Serbian regime, but that was not the whole story.

"The next day, they moved us into Macedonia. In Macedonia, the UNHCR [United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees] and other international groups were not well organized. I started working in the camps and I met people. I helped organize training of women, and we organized singing and dancing too: parties, classes, and performances. We tried to lift the spirits of people in this way.

"We started meeting in tents, and later held public meetings. The Dodona Theater, a youth group from Prishtina, helped us. We found a comedian too, and started giving children's shows. It was life happening. The numbers of spectators increased, and we began giving shows for the adults, too. We went to each camp more often.

"We were presenting comedy, with singing and dancing. Some of the elders in the camp did not approve, saying that we should not sing and dance during a time of war. That we must be quiet and mourn. But we did not listen to them."

Igo showed me pictures of people in the camps: an actor wearing a Panda costume, a father and son clapping. She continued, "I brought you these pictures so that you could see the faces of the people in the camps. We organized people in the camps to become active. We worked with girls, 100 at a time, then 300.

"We taught them self-defense. We taught them simple things. We tried to teach them to say, 'Yes, we can do it. If someone comes to arrest one of us, we can say, 'get out.' We worked in all the camps. I had freedom of movement. But the managers of the camps, the UNHCR and the IRC [International Rescue Committee], gave us more trouble than the Macedonian authorities.

"I came to as many camps as I could each day. I promised not to go back to Kosova without the people, and I stayed as long as I could in Macedonia, after most people had returned. Some people stayed behind because they had nowhere to go home to."

The Macedonia-based relief organization El Hilal was much lauded by locals and aid agencies alike for its quick response to the refugee emergency and ability to get aid to those in remote areas.

From a small office based in Skopje, El Hilal evolved into to the biggest and only local group covering the entire territory of the Republic of Macedonia. It had 14 Branches and more than 150 sub-branches, with 60 permanent activists, but was always capable of quickly mobilizing as many as 1,000 additional workers. It was especially proud of the fact that all its activists were volunteers, willing and determined to assist others.

In cooperation with the Prishtina-based "Mother Teresa," El Hilal undertook various humanitarian activities by offering assistance in food, clothing, and medicines, as well as making direct financial contributions to various humanitarian organizations and medical institutions of Kosovo.

EL HILAL, Cairska 52, 91000 Skopje, Republic of Macedonia; Tel: 99389-91-117412; Fax: 99389-91-118748; Email: [el\\_hilal@mol.com.mk](mailto:el_hilal@mol.com.mk)

Under the continuing direction of Vjosa Dobruna, the Center for the Protection of Women and Children opened a center in Tetovo, Macedonia.

Melihate Juniku recalled: "We did not do the same work as in Kosovo, but were more concerned with emergency tasks. We tried to help women with gynecological and pediatric problems.

"We offered reproductive services, as well as a psycho-social program for children. They drew pictures about their feelings: about what they feared, in order to confront this. They drew pictures of a free Kosovo. We worked in the camps, together with the League of Albanian Women. Our children's program was supposed to last three months there, but it was interrupted by our return.

"In the refugee camps it was the most difficult for the teenage girls. The high schools were not functioning. There were very few teachers. We were trying to arrange for buses to take students to the high school in Tetovo, but the planning discussions were drawn out for so long that nothing happened. We organized workshops with those teenagers where we got them to tell their stories and talk about their emotional state.

"Another thing we did was to offer refugees the use of our telephone so that they could find out information about their families. We also collected testimony about human rights abuses and provided this information to the Council for the Defense of Human Rights and Freedoms.

"What bothered me about the camps was the barbed wire around them. People had what they needed to eat and drink, but this was very disturbing. The Macedonian police kept people in. You had to have permission to come and go, or else people might leave the camps completely."

Nazlie Bala and the organization "Elena" also continued their work in Macedonia.

Nazlie told me, "When the bombing started, I stayed indoors for 10 days. I was isolated and I did not know what was happening. I heard stories that I couldn't confirm – that a lot of people were killed, especially human rights activists.

"On the 27th and the 28th of March the police came looking for me, but I was not at home. My father lied about where I was. I knew they would arrest me, so I stayed at other places for two days.

"Then on March 31, Serbian soldiers and police came and ordered me and my family to leave within five minutes. They were young soldiers with new uniforms, and they didn't know who I was. They told us to go to the train station. We went to Blace, where we were stuck for three days, and then we went to the town of Negotino near Gostivar.

"We formed as Elena again in Macedonia. We worked in two camps, Cegrane and Sanakos.

There, we organized workshops for women and children, for two months. These camps were near Gostivar. We did trauma and rape counseling, and worked with humanitarian organizations.

"We also worked outside the camps, where there was less international aid attention. We cooperated with the UNHCR, Save the Children, the ICTY [International Criminal Court for the former Yugoslavia], and the OSCE [Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe]. We started working with Albanians from Macedonia to share our experience with them, to help them to organize, and to link them up with international NGOs [nongovernmental organizations]. We didn't want to see them put off to one side. We had an office in Negotino, together with the Center for the Rehabilitation of Mothers and Children.

"There are 21 villages around Negotino, with over 30,000 inhabitants. They are far from the town, but there are no clinics. We started a clinic in Negotino with pediatric and gynecological services, which was open to both locals and refugees, in the interests of solidarity. All services were offered for free.

"At the same time, we helped organize exhibitions of children's drawings. For me, this was after my daytime work with the OSCE. So I often worked 18 to 20 hours a day."