



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

Issue 7: Kosovo's Minorities Under Siege, September 21, 1999

Contents

- **From the AP Editorial Desk**
- **To Be a Serb in Kosovo**
- **When the Bandits Came**
- **Putting Out Fires**
- **Roma – The Lost People**
- **"They steal without a second thought"**

From the AP Editorial Desk by Iain Guest

On paper, Kosovo is a "multiethnic" society. True, there was virtual apartheid between the Serbs and Albanians throughout much of the 1990s. Nonetheless, the last census to be taken found that out of a total population of 2.3 million, there were about 210,000 Serbs and between 30,000 and 40,000 Roma.

The UN Mission in Kosovo (UNMIK) has been given a mandate from the UN Security Council to preserve the multiethnic and multicultural character of Kosovo. If this can be done it might finally break the cycle of ethnic violence and revenge in the Balkans.

But can it in fact be done? Since June 12, Serbs have been leaving Kosovo for Serbia in large numbers. According to some estimates, fewer than 25,000 now remain. The Roma (Gypsies), too, are under pressure. They have no homeland to go to, like the Serbs. But they are frightened, and leaderless.

This issue of On the Record looks at what it means to belong to Kosovo's two minorities, Serb and Roma. It is a sobering story. As so often is the case in the Balkans, freedom for one group has meant terror for another. On paper, Kosovo is a "multiethnic" society. True, there was virtual apartheid between the Serbs and Albanians throughout much of the 1990s. Nonetheless, the last census to be taken found that out of a total population of 2.3 million, there were about 210,000 Serbs and between 30,000 and 40,000 Roma.

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To Be a Serb in Kosovo

Some parts of Kosovo – Peja (Pec), Prizren, and Gjakova (Djakovica) – have almost completely lost their Serbian population. Prishtina [Pristina] is losing Serbs every day.

One of the largest concentrations of Serbs is to be found in the northern town of Mitrovica, which is controlled by French KFOR troops. Mitrovica lies between the center of Kosovo and the economically crucial Trepca mines, the heart of Kosovo's industry.

Mitrovica is divided into two parts – a central area and a smaller peripheral neighborhood. The Serbs (who were always a minority in this town) have taken control of the larger section and are preventing Albanians from returning to their homes. This has the support of the French NATO troops, who have agreed to the division of the town. The policy provoked angry demonstrations by Albanians throughout July and August.

Gjilan (Gnjilane), in southeastern Kosovo, on the border with Serbia proper, is another location where a concentrated Serbian population has stayed in place. Incidents of violence incited by Serbs against Albanians, and retaliatory actions by Albanians against Serbs, have been a regular occurrence.

About 3,000 Serbs have been living in a small enclave in the town of Orahovac, under the protection of Dutch troops. 2,000 are still living in their original homes, 800 have moved up from the lower part of town, and the remaining 200 left the nearby village of Zociste for Orahovac as soon as the NATO bombing stopped. They probably knew that they would face reprisals because the Serbs had set up a checkpoint outside Zociste that Albanians described as "very tough." Several massacres took place in the area.

The villagers of Zociste have kept their tractors piled high, and are waiting for an opportunity to leave for Serbia. They are already displaced from their own homes, and there may be little point in trying to persuade them to stay in overcrowded Orahovac. But the same may not be true of the Serbs from Orahovac itself, even though their current situation is extremely hazardous. Dutch KFOR troops have set up a base in the main square, and patrol around the clock. But twenty Serbs have been kidnapped since KFOR arrived.

These Serbs are living in a ghetto. They have no sense of security and no money. Most worked in the lower part of Orahovac town or in other parts of Kosovo, and are now out of work. They have alleged that the KLA has taken over key positions in the town administration and were trying to prevent them from receiving water and electricity.

It is understandable that Kosovo's Serbs would want to stay in their homes, in spite of the

overwhelming hostility directed at them by their neighbors. After all, the life of a refugee is not to be chosen casually. In addition, Kosovo Serbs have had a poor reception in Serbia, which may be hardly surprising given that the economic infrastructure of Serbia has been destroyed and hundreds of thousands are already out of work. Serb-owned cars full of possessions have reportedly been turned back when trying to arrive from Kosovo. As a result, many Serb refugees have resorted to selling their belongings just to get over the border into Serbia.

But what future is there for the Serbs in Kosovo itself? The following excerpts describe the ordeal of one Serb family that was recently expelled from the apartment in Prishtina where they lived for twenty-four years. The incident is described from the perspective of two members of The Advocacy Project: Peter Lippman (one of the two authors of this series) and Iain Guest, who was visiting Kosovo at the time.

When the Bandits Came

From Peter's diaries, Thursday, July 22, 1999:

After a couple of weeks of sharing the Albanians' feeling of euphoria in their new-found freedom, I am starting to feel nervous. There have been a couple of bomb attacks on a nearby Serbian-owned house, whose inhabitants are reportedly former paramilitary members. Teresa was walking near the stadium and passed some KFOR troops tending to a Serb who had been shot in the head.

But what makes me most nervous are the recent events in the building where we have been staying. A few days ago, some Albanian bandits started coming to the outer door of the hallway, demanding to be let in. Fejza or Adem (our Albanian hosts) answered the door, while two Serb families living in the hallway stayed inside their apartments. Fejza and Adem refused to let the bandits in, and they began receiving threats and verbal abuse as a result.

A few days ago some other Serb neighbors in the same building were threatened. The bandits told them they had three hours to move out and warned them not to call KFOR (the NATO peacekeepers). The Serbs gave the bandits the keys and left. An Albanian man moved into that apartment. The Serbs called KFOR anyway, and the troops came and arrested the Albanian. The Serbs (who had moved to another part of Prishtina) subsequently received a death threat there over the phone.

Friday, July 23, 1999:

Rada, one of Fejza's two Serb neighbors, was talking to me about all the problems. She told me that some of her relatives in Orahovac had been kidnapped by the KLA after KFOR arrived. Some of them were released, and some have not been heard from. All of their houses were burned.

All of this has understandably made the two Serb couples in Fejza's hallway very nervous. Rada next door came over for coffee yesterday. I asked her for an interview so I could get a Serbian point of view. She declined, but then talked non-stop about her problems for the next fifteen

minutes. "I wouldn't wish this on our worst enemies" she said. "I was very Yugoslav-oriented, not nationalist at all. I have been here thirty years. (She came from Montenegro.) I worked at the newspaper Rilindja, and knew the Albanian language very well. I loved Albanians; more of them were my friends than were Serbs. Fejza here is like a sister to me.

"These last ten years, when everything was heating up, have been very bad. Now it is hell for us. After what happened to those neighbors yesterday, I'm still nervous. See, my hands are shaking. And I got a call in the middle of the night, where they just said, 'I'm going to kill you.' If things calm down by September, so that my son can come back and go to school, then I will stay here. (At this point, she got up and crossed herself.) But if not, I'll move back to Montenegro where my parents live. I'd sleep on the floor, just so my son could go to school. He's very smart and it would be a shame to waste that."

Later, Fejza told me, "Rada said that if something happened to her, I should take her valuable things like the embroidery and the television set, so that they don't get stolen. I said, 'Aman, don't even talk about it.' "

Earlier in the day I had visited friends in Prishtina with whom I stayed last year. I described the threats to them, and they just laughed. To the father, it was obviously a reasonable reversal of fortune. We discussed revenge a bit. I remembered what one Albanian asked me: "If you are bit by a mosquito, do you look for that mosquito or do you go after all mosquitoes?" Veton, the 16-year-old who had given me a magnificent private piano concert last year, said, "I am against revenge. I don't want anything to do with it."

While Fejza, Rada, and I were conversing, the doorbell rang. Fejza went into the hallway and I heard a very brief discussion. Then she came back and locked the door. She said that the bandits were demanding that she open the outer door or they would break it. Soon we heard a loud noise. Fejza and Rada went into the hallway and I stayed in the apartment, not knowing what to do. I heard some yelling for a couple of minutes. Then I heard some screaming. I went into the hallway and Rada was leaning against the wall, screaming and holding her head. Three or four young men in t-shirts were leaving.

The bandits left, and Rada and Fejza came into the apartment. Rada told me what had happened. She had run to the apartment door and her husband started to open it. She pulled it closed so the bandits would not go in. She feared it would be worse if they found her husband inside. The bandits figured out that she was a Serb and became very angry. One of them had a pistol. He hit Rada on the head with it, and that's when she began screaming. Probably the bandits started leaving because of the screaming.

We called KFOR and they said that they would come in ten minutes. Rada tried to get into her apartment but the door was stuck, since the bandits had been pushing on it. Slavko, Rada's husband, was frantic to get out. So I kicked the door in for him. Then he and Rada, and the other couple in the apartment at the end of the hall, all started moving their televisions and other valuables into Fejza's apartment. They were moving gilt-framed embroidery samples, dishes, and lace tablecloths. They were planning to leave.

They were moving their things quickly and fairly calmly. Fejza and I did not know what to do. Fejza was frantic. She was trying to get in touch with Adem, but couldn't. She started crying. The KFOR people were not coming and this was making us all nervous. I called KFOR back and expressed my anxiety in strong terms.

About 45 minutes later, four bandits came back. This time Fejza stayed in the apartment. I thought a little about what my responsibility was and went out into the hall. It was much more a reflexive action than a considered decision. The four men were very angry that I was there. I pretended not to have any common language with them. They questioned me in Albanian and I answered them in English, so there was not much communication.

It was clear however that they were very upset by my presence. They were trying to figure out who I was and what I was doing there. After a while they went down to Rada's apartment. She yelled, "Please give us an hour to clear out." They told her, "You have a half hour." They gave me one last stern look and cleared out, all in white t-shirts.

With exquisite timing, three KFOR soldiers showed up a few minutes later. The leader, Corporal Tomlinson, tried to calm us all down and establish some order. The Serbs were frantic to leave, and were still putting their possessions into Fejza's apartment. Corporal Tomlinson tried to put a stop to that as it would implicate Fejza and Adem if the bandits came back. He also tried to get us all out of the hallway so that they could set up an ambush to catch the bandits if they came back. This was very difficult to achieve as we were all running around like nervous chickens. Around that time Iain (my colleague from The Advocacy Project) showed up, as did Fjolla.

With me translating between Corporal Tomlinson and the Serbs, we finally established some order and made some decisions. Corporal Tomlinson promised to drive the Serbs to Kosovo Polje, where they would find refuge. As a formality he asked both couples whether they had any weapons. Rada and Slavko had nothing. However, the other couple pulled out a "trophy" pistol in a felt bag and handed it to Corporal Tomlinson. He did not want anything left for the bandits to find. Then the other Serb woman, named Mara, said there was one more thing. She opened up a cupboard and had Corporal Tomlinson pull out a weapon. He handed it to me to hold. It was a longish heavy thing and there were a couple of cartridge clips. I asked Corporal Tomlinson what it was and he said it was an AK-47. Mara had a son who had been in the army and had left Kosovo.

Corporal Tomlinson was very polite and solicitous. He told me, "All the Serbs have guns. The Albanians too. I would keep one, if I were here. I do this work, arresting people, all day every day. We have been making ten or so arrests each day. It's a very complicated job. There's not much order. If I get a call right now saying that someone has been shot somewhere, I will have to leave."

He continued, "I love my job. I haven't had to kill anyone, so far. Last week I separated two men who were fighting. They were both Albanians. One had a pistol and the other a hand grenade. He had pulled the pin on it. They were holding onto each other, each to prevent the other from killing him. I separated them and took the grenade. The pin had broken and so could not be replaced. I took the grenade and threw it in a hole in the sidewalk. It exploded harmlessly. I said

to the men, 'There, that wasn't so bad, was it?' "

Another time three Albanian families argued over who would take over an abandoned apartment. They wanted to rent it out. I asked Corporal Tomlinson if he ever slept. "Not much," he replied.

We walked into Fejza's kitchen so that Corporal Tomlinson could go out on the balcony to use his mobile radio. He said to me, "Do you know what my job is like? Do you know what I have to deal with? Look out the window." I looked out into the darkness. Two blocks away there was a house in full blaze. I thought of hell.

Corporal Tomlinson left his two partners and drove the Serbs to their refuge. Iain and I fixed the lock on the outer door and then went inside. The two soldiers stayed inside so as to surprise the bandits, if they returned. I sat with one of them describing what I could remember of the bandits. The main thing I could remember was the white t-shirts and the bad teeth.

After a time the soldier got up to go across the hall to his mate. While doing so he caught sight of four men running down the stairs. He called his partner and they ran after the perpetrators. Iain and I sat down to have a cold drink with Adem, who had shown up in the meantime.

After a short while, one of the soldiers came back up and asked me to come downstairs and make an identification. They had caught four men. Iain and I went down and I recognized some of them. The one who had been going through my pockets was not among them, but the one with bad teeth, who had hit Rada with a pistol, was there. I identified him and went and finished my dinner. Iain stayed down and watched the soldiers throw the four bandits roughly into the back of a jeep.

The soldiers came back and asked me to go make a statement to the military police. We rode in the back of another jeep to their headquarters. The young man who took my deposition explained to us, "We have a kind of rough justice here. With regard to violent crimes, British law is applied in this sector. Your testimony will be treated as concrete evidence. These men will be tried in the morning and will probably end up in jail for four to six weeks. There have been no repeat offenders. They are very scared of being involved with us. There are people who have fainted when we were driving them to prison, because of the torture they experienced there before under the Serbs."

"For each of these people that we catch, there are more to take their place. The civilian police needs to be formed. We have been putting up signs in front of apartments, saying that anyone caught evicting someone or stealing will be put in jail. But it has turned out that these signs are really just an invitation to commit a crime. People see the signs and say, 'Oh, I didn't know Serbs were living there.' "

I gave my deposition and a British officer wrote it down in longhand, which took up about six pages and two hours. I offered to write it myself but he had to stick to the regulations. The officer asked me for my address. I started to give him my e-mail address, and he said, "No, this is the army. We're still using pigeons."

Iain was waiting for me to finish and made the mistake of playing a game of chess with the Albanian translator. Never play chess with an Albanian unless you are a masochist. When it was all done, Iain said to me, "Well, how are you going to write this up?"

That night I slept at Ibrahim's house for safety. Ibrahim showed me the bullet holes in his bedroom wall from when the Serb paramilitaries attacked on the night of June 12, when the Russians unexpectedly came into Prishtina ahead of NATO. He explained that the practice was to fire tracer bullets into a house. The tracer bullets start fires. Then if people put out the fire, the paramilitaries knew that there was someone in the house.

The paramilitaries went to the house next door to Ibrahim's and shot several people. They then came and made everyone at Ibrahim's lie down on the floor for about an hour. They beat Ibrahim's wife Violeta and took everyone's jewelry and money. Ibrahim told me that he thinks the Serbs took 20 or 30 million Deutschmarks out of Kosovo that night. He commented: "When the violence starts, you never know where it's going to end. You can't stop it the way you'd like to."

Over at Fejza's the situation was quite worrisome. There were two empty apartments in her hallway, full of furniture. It was a magnet for thieves. Fejza was terribly afraid the bandits would come back and take out their anger on her. Adem's sister (who lives upstairs and is a lawyer) faulted me for getting in the hallway when the commotion was happening.

Fjolla told me, "It was their (the Serbs') fault for staying. They should have known when to get out and they should have gotten out when they could have saved themselves."

Everyone decided that the best thing to do was to get some trusted Albanian families into the Serbs' apartments, so that the bandits would not come back and steal, or move someone of their own people in. Adem had relatives whose houses had been burned in Mitrovica, and they decided to move in. I talked to Fron, a young man from Mitrovica, and his wife. She said: "I would not have moved in here, but Adem asked me to." Fron said, "I don't want to stay here. This is not my place, and never will be my place. As far as these people who were kicked out of here, I feel sorry for them as humans. But as for the Serbs in general, I can't feel anything for them at all."

I don't think that what the bandits did to the two Serbian families on Fejza's hallway was revenge, just banditry. Albanians have been asking why the international community lets all this go on. "Is this as a relief valve, or is it just to make us look bad? Will they now say, 'See, you are just like the Serbs?'"

My own thought is just that the international community was unprepared for the task of taking over the province. It all happened so quickly that I don't know how they could have been prepared.

One rumor going around is that the Serbian troops in Serbia are preparing for an invasion of Kosovo. I'm sure this is not true, but it's an indication of the jumpiness of Albanians in Kosovo. Meanwhile there are large anti-Milosevic demonstrations going on in various parts of Serbia, as

various "democrats" compete for the leadership of a new government. I imagine there will be a change in Serbia, either this year, or sometime in the next five years.

The latest news as I was leaving Kosovo was that fourteen Serbs had been killed in a village near Prishtina. The euphoria has worn off. I have seen anarchy and I don't like it. At least, not this form of anarchy, in which anyone with a white t-shirt can wander around and steal from whomever he wants. Kosovo needs to be a protectorate. Right now there are 36,000 foreign troops in the province, and they are not up to the task. Perhaps in a few months things will be better under control. They have to be. (July 23, 1999)

Putting Out Fires

From the editorial desk

Iain Guest, a colleague of Peter's from The Advocacy Project, was with Peter in Kosovo when the events just described took place. Here, he reflects on why 40,000 NATO peacekeepers are unable to protect Kosovo's minorities. The article was written in the first week of August.

The limitations on NATO's Kosovo Force (KFOR) were demonstrated on July 23, when fourteen Serb farmers were murdered in their fields. But the threat to Kosovo's Serbs is plain for any visitor to see.

I witnessed it first-hand during a visit to Albanian friends, described above by my colleague Peter. Across the hallway, several Albanians claiming to be KLA hammered on the door of a flat where a Serb family had lived for twenty-four years. When the wife answered the door, they hit her with a pistol butt, and told her and her husband to leave in thirty minutes. KFOR troops arrived soon afterwards, but the terrified Serbs left immediately, after leaving their valuables with their Albanian neighbors.

Rather stupidly, the attackers returned and were arrested by the KFOR patrol. But the damage had been done. One more corridor had been ethnically cleansed, and Kosovo's multiethnic character was a little bit weaker. Meanwhile, in the street opposite a Serb house was on fire. Ten "house burnings" were investigated by KFOR that night.

Even if the Serbs remain, they are often too cowed and isolated to even leave their flats. As Bernard Kouchner, the UN Special Envoy told a press conference recently, living in deplorable conditions with the door shut for week after week is no life.

As is so often the case in war-torn societies, many international aid agencies are asking how they can promote reconciliation in Kosovo. They seem unwilling to accept that the time is not yet ripe, and that justice must precede reconciliation.

There is, at present, a profound lack of justice in Kosovo and it predates the cycle of killing that started in 1998. The assault on justice began in 1989, when Albanian autonomy was stripped away. By 1998, according to the UN, only 30 of the 756 judges and prosecutors in Kosovo were Albanian.

Serbs would say that the injustice began long before 1989, with discrimination against Serbs, and that the Albanians were underrepresented in all professions at their own choosing. But regardless of rights and wrongs, the resentment goes very deep, even between friends. The Serb family that was summarily evicted from their home in Prishtina in front of Peter and myself lived opposite its Albanian neighbours for twenty-four years. They considered each other friends. Yet the Serb professor earned 800 marks a month throughout the 1990s while his Albanian neighbour (also a professor) was lucky to make 250 marks. What irritated the Albanian almost as much as the disparity was the fact that his Serb friend never once showed concern for his obvious lack of resources.

These two families were able to bury any resentment, but it is hardly surprising that the Albanians feel such open hatred towards Serbs after the events of the last eighteen months. As Peter explained, an Albanian family has moved temporarily into the apartment vacated by the expelled Serbs. The oldest member is paralysed because Serb paramilitaries wrenched out his tongue. On the night that the Russians arrived at Prishtina airport, the paramilitaries celebrated with an orgy of killing in Prishtina.

Such acts cannot be described in simplistic terms. Even calling them "war crimes" forces them into a legal and institutional straightjacket, which instantly narrows the possibilities for action.

At present, there are roughly 40,000 NATO troops in Kosovo. It is, at first sight, a huge force for such a small area. And yet the violent attacks on minorities, culminating in the massacre of Serb farmers at Gracko, has raised major questions about KFOR's ability, or desire, to enforce security.

As in Bosnia, Kosovo has been divided up into several sectors, which are under the command of NATO contingents from France, Britain, the United States, Italy/Spain, and Germany. Other NATO countries have also contributed. Eventually, Russia plans to send a total of 3,600 troops.

To see checkpoints jointly manned by young soldiers from Russia, the Netherlands and Germany is a reminder of how the world has changed. Still, the Russian presence is deeply disturbing, because the Russians have sided with Serbia from the start of the Kosovo crisis.

In one respect, KFOR appears to suffer from its diversity. All KFOR troops have the same mandate and rules of engagement, but just how these rules are interpreted depends on the sector commander. This in turn depends on the type of troops deployed and, what one official refers to as, "military culture."

The British soldiers we encountered in Prishtina have the experience of Northern Ireland, and patrol aggressively. At the other extreme, the Italian soldiers in Gjakova (Djakovica) were almost entirely passive for weeks, and rarely responded to UNHCR appeals to intervene when houses were set on fire.

But even when it comes to the "interventionist" British KFOR, humanitarian agencies are never quite sure what it will take to trigger an intervention. This is because while KFOR has a clear

mandate to ensure security, it also insists that it cannot possibly assume the function of the police. "There just aren't enough troops, and it's not our job," said one KFOR officer.

This attitude has caused some tension between KFOR and the humanitarian agencies. According to reports, UNMIK asked KFOR to set up a special hotline for use in emergencies. KFOR replied that such a hotline exists by telephone – which is true, except that few telephones exist. On one occasion, KFOR was told that some Serb refugees from Croatia who had sought shelter in a hotel in Prishtina were in danger. The warning was not acted on, and two of the Serbs were kidnapped, forcing the rest to flee.

Following the massacre at Gracko, it was revealed that the Serb farmers had asked for a KFOR escort before they went out to harvest. General Sir Michael Jackson told a press conference that KFOR had offered a patrol the following day. But the impression remains that KFOR is not enthusiastic about its enforcement role. This is strongly denied by KFOR.

My impression, after watching British troops deal with the expulsion of Serbs from the Prishtina apartment, described above, is that both sides are right:

KFOR is performing a police role, at least in Prishtina. But it is clearly not appropriate or enough. The four Albanians were arrested by British military police and charged under British law. If the evidence was strong, they would have been held for 48 hours and either released or handed over to the mobile court for sentencing.

They were arrested by soldiers, not police, and as such they were handled roughly "to teach them a lesson." But in all likelihood they would also be free within weeks, if not days, harboring new resentment against the Serbs of Prishtina. And once they returned to the street – no doubt heroes to their friends – the chances of the Serb family returning would surely be remote indeed.

As for the British soldiers, once these four arrests had been made, there were ten other fires to put out that night. Watching this highly trained force of British paratroopers race around Prishtina trying to protect about a thousand Serbs who were afraid to leave their homes, one had to agree with KFOR: this was not the answer. But there will be no alternative until the international community can build a new civilian police force.

Iain Guest's report on the peacekeeping operation in Kosovo is available at the website of the International Council of Voluntary Agencies: <www.icva.ch>

Roma – The Lost People

From the editorial desk:

The Roma were disliked by the Serbs and Albanians of Kosovo alike. During the NATO intervention, they found themselves in the middle of the conflict between Albanians and Serbs. Most Roma speak Albanian as their mother tongue, which meant that they were often identified with the Albanians.

But the Serbian authorities also used the Roma in a divide-and-conquer strategy against the Albanians. Some Roma men were drafted into the army along with Serbian men and took part in the crimes committed against the Albanians. According to the testimony of Albanian eyewitnesses, many Roma freely took advantage of the opportunity to pillage Albanian-owned houses and flats.

Many Roma took a gamble on which side would win, and they lost. Upon the withdrawal of Serbian troops from Kosovo, Albanian reprisals against Roma families were swift and widespread. Completely lacking in defense and organization, most of the Roma left for Macedonia, Serbia, Montenegro, or Italy: in short, they fled to wherever they were allowed to go. The remaining several thousand are now huddled in tent camps outside of Gjakova and Prishtina, fearing to leave the grounds of their camps, but unwelcome in neighboring countries.

From Peter's diaries:

I went to a collective center for displaced Roma at Kosovo Polje, on the outskirts of Prishtina. Kosovo Polje is the location of the Turks' historical victory over the Serbs in 1389, and a place of refuge for many of the Serbs from Prishtina. Approximately 8,000 Roma moved into a high school in this town in late June when they left Prishtina and other nearby localities under pressure from returning Albanians.

The Roma were about to be moved from the school to a nearby tent camp set up by the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). Some UNHCR moving vans and some KFOR soldiers were placed at the entrance. There were around two hundred Roma sitting outside the school building, with piles of bedding, cradles, and other belongings waiting to be loaded. The women and children had already left.

As I walked onto the school grounds, a Rom man was telling a KFOR soldier that two Albanian youths had just come up behind a fence and thrown rocks at the school windows. The KFOR soldier promised to look for them. I took the opportunity to introduce myself to the Roma and ask for an interview.

We took two chairs and sat against a wall, and immediately there were a dozen curious, idle Roma gathered around to participate in the interview. Two men explained to me why they and their families had left Prishtina:

"We came to Kosovo Polje because Albanians started threatening us as soon as they came back from Macedonia. They were entering our houses, stealing from us, and beating us. Their goal is the ethnic cleansing of Kosovo, nothing else. We were driven out of our houses.

"We arrived in Kosovo Polje on foot in columns, on June 20th. Along the way we were mistreated and stoned by Albanians. When we arrived here from Prishtina there was already a group of Roma that had come from near Lipljan. Then people arrived from all over this part of Kosovo: Mitrovica, Vucitrn, Lipljan, Prishtina, and Obilic. There were around 8,000 people. Now about half of those have left for Macedonia, Montenegro, or countries in Europe."

I asked why the Albanians accused the Roma of theft and other crimes. I was told, "The people who committed these crimes are not here – they are not us. They were paramilitaries and mercenaries. They have left Kosovo."

When I asked whether there were Roma among those who committed the crimes, I was told, "I don't think so. These accusations are not true. We are a peaceful people. We didn't have real rights under the Serbian regime, but we had a certain amount of freedom. Now we have lost that. We were kicked out of our apartments and houses in Prishtina. The KLA came to our homes and told us to leave."

One man described his experiences in Prishtina during the NATO bombing. He said, "We weren't able to go outside during the bombing. It was a big problem for those of us whose main language is Albanian. The police would ask us, 'What are you?' I would say, 'I'm a Rom, and my mother tongue is Albanian.' Then the police would say, 'No, you are Albanian, and you must have a green card' (identification card for Albanians). They treated us like Albanians."

"This conflict is between the Serbs and the Albanians," continued another man. "We are in the middle, the victims of both sides. The KLA has kidnapped Roma after the return of the Albanian refugees. We have reported this to the International Red Cross and KFOR, but I don't know the number."

"Now we are moving to a new camp. There is dust there, and it is unhealthy for the children. We have told the UNHCR that we feel there is no future for us in Kosovo, and that we want to leave for a third country. We have received no answer from them about this. We are to live in the new camp for four weeks. What will happen after that, I don't know. Others will decide that."

I was asked for whom I was writing. One man said to me, "Many people have come and written different things from what they actually saw. They wrote that we were thieves. Deutsche Welle said in a broadcast that we are used to this kind of life. That's not true. We are used to living in houses. You should see the houses we used to live in, where we came from."

"Now everyone thinks that the Albanians are the best people in the world. This is not true. They don't know about democracy. They had all their rights here in Kosovo, under Serbia. They had doctors, they were educated. They just wanted to secede from Serbia."

"We Roma were a national minority under Serbia. We all had rights, maybe more than in some other countries. In Albania they speak only Albanian, but here you could speak your mother tongue. You have fifty states in the United States, right? You have to respect the law and the existence of the states, don't you?"

One tall man stood near me, angrily waving a table leg. He said, "We will walk all the way to Macedonia if we have to." (July 23, 1999)

"They steal without a second thought"

From the editor's desk:

Iain Guest visits the Roma of Gjakova and describes how prejudice impedes their protection

The Roma are truly the lost people of Kosovo. For years they have lived in Kosovo without being aligned with either of the two main ethnic groups, and suffered as a result. Until 1981, they were required to send their children to Albanian schools, and they lived among the Albanians. But they were distrusted by the Albanians and turned to the minority Serbs for protection.

It is common to hear that the Roma were recruited by the Serbs during the war, and actively took part in acts of violence against the Albanians. Indeed, it is hard to hear a good word about the Roma. One international official said casually that "they steal without a second thought," and recounted how two Roma men were almost beaten to death in one of the Macedonian camps, because one of them was found by a refugee to be wearing a locket that had belonged to his murdered father. The Roma admitted to having taken it from the body, but without any sign of remorse.

Stories like this paint an unpleasant picture of the Roma and deepen their isolation in Kosovo. Over the last few weeks, hundreds started to leave their homes in a suburb of Prishtina, and encamped in a school near a KFOR base. Their numbers quickly grew to 5,000, and UNHCR decided to move them to another emergency temporary site for their safety. The move was not easy, and the buses were stoned by locals. But KFOR felt better able to patrol the new location. Besides, the school is to be reopened.

A similar situation exists in the town of Gjakova, where Roma began to leave their homes recently for a piece of ground next to the cemetery. Within days, seven hundred were camped out in very poor conditions. UNHCR offered tents, and portable toilets have been put up. Italians troops from KFOR stand guard around the clock.

In spite of these security measures, two Roma were reportedly snatched on the bridge two days before our arrival, and another was bundled into a car as he walked outside the fence during our visit. The KFOR troops either did not notice or did not care. One man, whose baby appeared malnourished, said that a KFOR doctor had paid a visit and advised him to take the baby to hospital. This he would never do: when another Roma family had visited the hospital, he said, the father was kidnapped from the ward by the KLA.

The Roma said that none of those kidnapped have reappeared. In a nearby field, next to the old Roma cemetery, there are several fresh graves. One has been partially exhumed, and according to a UNHCR official, the body was clearly visible. The Roma fear that the bodies may be of kidnap victims.

These Roma of Gjakova present UNHCR with a dilemma. The best solution would be for them to return home, and many Roma in the town remain in their homes. But the Roma feel as insecure as the Serbs in Orahovac, and they do not want to return home.

However, they could not remain in their current surroundings, which are part owned by the cemetery and part by an oxygen-making company that wants to reclaim the land and restart production. UNHCR has identified a location that is out of town and easier to protect. It also lies next to seven Roma houses whose occupants have not left. This makes it a suitable location. But it was clear that the Roma would take some convincing.

With one voice, they asked to be resettled abroad – and wondered how this could be refused when so many Albanians had been treated so generously. It was hard to explain that European governments are shutting the doors to asylum seekers, particularly those like the Roma with a reputation for being unproductive and untrustworthy.

One feature of the Roma crisis is the difficulty of communications between the Roma and international officials. This adds to their isolation. Many Europeans have difficulty understanding the Roma, and find nothing attractive in their itinerant way of life. (In fact, the stereotype of Roma as "wanderers" is far from the truth. Kosovo's Roma have long since settled in villages, towns, and city neighborhoods.) Such negative stereotypes are even more likely to flourish in a polarized context like Kosovo. Aid officials complain that they "lack a sense of responsibility, and an ability to take control. They follow orders, and don't produce leaders."

But Europe's Roma are fiercely independent and resilient. Somehow UNHCR has to find this resilience in the Roma of Kosovo, and work with it. It will take some searching, but it certainly exists. One outspoken Roma in the Gjakova settlement, Gzim Zeqir, claimed that he had been elected leader recently, and that the rest would follow his lead. He had been taken by KFOR to identify some KLA members who were suspected of intimidating Roma families, and was clearly someone of determination and initiative. If he could be convinced that the UNHCR's plans to move the Roma were in their interest, then UNHCR could find itself with an intermediary and the Roma could regain some of their self-confidence.

It is worth recalling that Bosnia's Roma have also suffered from an inability to communicate with the international agencies and the inability of international agencies to appreciate their strengths. During the war, the Roma were denied humanitarian aid because they did not fit into any of the main religious/ethnic categories.

Instead of lapsing into despair, the Roma of Tuzla formed a council that now has several hundred members and allowed them to talk to the international community with a unified voice. They raised money from European Roma, which they used to put their children back into school. All of this was achieved without a paid staff or even an office. It would be relatively easy for an NGO to bring a delegation of Bosnian Roma to Kosovo and share some inspiration with their demoralised brethren.

From Peter's diaries:

During one interview I questioned a woman activist about the attacks against Serbs and Roma. She told me: "No one is forcing the Serbs and Roma to leave, as they did to us. They are in danger, not from me, but from those who were their victims. For those who committed crimes, we will treat them like criminals. Their place is in The Hague. For the others, this is their

homeland as well as ours."

I have encountered a mixture of defensiveness and recognition of what is right, as in the following statement from Father Nash: "How would you feel if ten members of your family died? We need to channel that negative energy, and get the criminals to court. Or else people will continue to take the law into their own hands."

Father Nash also criticizes NATO troops: "KFOR has failed the test. In Mitrovica the population was 8 per cent Serbian, but KFOR has allowed them to take over more than half of the city. They also took weapons from ordinary people, but they did not demilitarize the Serbian secret police and paramilitary operatives who have stayed in Kosovo. This is especially a problem in the French and Italian sectors. In Mitrovica, the Serbs are armed. That is the most developed part of Kosovo, where there are rich mineral deposits. KFOR has declared that Kosovo will not be divided, but it is happening on their watch."

A human rights worker at the Humanitarian Law Center shows a measure of concern for the victims of expulsion: ""The Roma? The Roma were a serious problem before the NATO intervention. They were very involved in crimes against Albanians. Often they came to finish the job that the Serbian police started. Albanians had very bad experiences with Roma. The Roma weren't forced to be mobilized, but acted voluntarily. The period of the NATO intervention was not the only time they have done this. All of last year this was going on. Not all Roma participated, of course. It is not good to generalize. The Roma are very poor, and this was a chance for them to get some money."

"The evictions are a big problem. Some of those who have left Kosovo were directly involved in war crimes. Every Serbian man between the ages of 18 and 70 was mobilized. The local Serbs did many bad things. Now the parents of those who have left are having problems. One man who left was suspected of killing 200 people. He is responsible, but his mother who stayed here will have problems.

"But in four or five months things will be better here than in Serbia. There will be jobs. There will not be too much revenge. You cannot remember everything that happened in fifty years. Eventually, Albanians will concentrate on their economic situation." (July 27, 1999)