

Overview - Kosovo Civil Society 1989-2000

For the last twelve years, civil society in Kosovo has been struggling to make its voice heard. First, under Serbian rule, then during war and exiles, and most recently during the last year of U.N. administration. These pages look at the struggle through the eyes of several prominent Kosovar activists.

Contents

- Competing Nationalisms
- Repression
- The Parallel Society and the Birth of Civic Action
- The Serbian Offensive
- The Dogs Were our Radar – Coping with War
- Civil Society in Exile
- War Crimes Give Campaigners a Target
- The Humanitarian Invasion



Pro-West graffiti outside the National Theater in Prishtina, Kosovo

The story of modern Kosovo began in 1389, when the kingdom of Serbia was defeated at Kosovo Polje by the Ottoman Turks. That defeat gave Kosovo a mythical place in Serbia's history.

By the 1970s, most of Kosovo's inhabitants were ethnic Albanian, and Kosovo was given the status of an autonomous province under the 1974 constitution of Yugoslavia. This made Kosovo a tempting target for Serbia's manipulative President Slobodan Milosevic in the late 1980s, as he was seeking to enflame Serbian nationalism. In 1989, Milosevic revoked Kosovo's autonomy and dissolved the constitution.

The Albanians responded with non-violent resistance. In a valiant reassertion of their autonomy, they set up their own form of government, known as the "parallel society."

By 1997 young Kosovars were tiring of this form of passive, non-violent opposition to Serbia. Students took to the streets to demand a restoration of their education rights. A shadowy new guerrilla organization, the Kosova Liberation Army (KLA), emerged.

Serbia attempted to suppress the KLA with violent attacks on the civilian population. The international community tried to stop the bloodshed at the Rambouillet (Paris) conference but failed to resolve the crisis. Serbian forces then stepped up their campaign in Kosovo, finally

triggering a massive aerial campaign by the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) on March 24, 1999.



Protecting Prizren
Macedonia and Albania.

After weeks of bombardment, Serbian forces finally withdrew from Kosovo on June 10, 1999, making way for an international peace mission. This mission comprised a NATO force (KFOR) and a large U.N. civilian mission (UNMIK) that was to administer Kosovo until a long-term solution could be found for the province.

Kosovo's parallel society had been battered but not broken by this violent sequence of events. During the 1999 war, some of its member associations provided humanitarian assistance to displaced Kosovars. Others were forced into exile, where they regrouped and resumed working in the refugee camps of

They returned after the war to devastation, death, and despair. An estimated 10,000 Kosovars were missing or dead. Mass graves littered the country. Landmines and unexploded NATO cluster bombs continued to take lives. Adding to the anguish, hundreds of Kosovars had been snatched by the retreating Serbian forces and now languished in Serbia jails.

At this critical moment, when they should have been forging a partnership in Kosovo, the international community and civil society began to draw apart. For the United Nations and NATO, the immediate priorities were to provide emergency assistance and protect Kosovo's minorities, particularly Serbs and Roma.

But this caused them to ignore Kosovo's experienced civil society. Instead of drawing on the veterans of the parallel society, Western governments turned to their own nongovernmental organizations (NGOs). Foreign relief workers poured into Kosovo. To the extent that educated Kosovars were used in the relief operation, it was as drivers, guards and interpreters.

The United Nations set about dismantling what remained of the parallel administrative structure, on grounds that was "politicized." It seemed that Kosovo would have to be rebuilt from zero.

By October 2000, on the eve of Kosovo's first municipal elections, the international push to jumpstart reconstruction had run into grave difficulties. The economy was a shell, the U.N.'s attempt to develop political parties and common political goals for the province had stalled, and minorities were still being attacked.

Meanwhile, many Kosovar civic groups had lost their drive. Some new initiatives - like the Internet Project Kosovo - had flourished. Over 600 local NGOs had been created. But this did not automatically mean a strong, vibrant civil society: most of these NGOs will probably disappear once donor funds dry up.

Much of this could have been predicted. But looking back over 16 months of peace-building, many will feel that the international community has failed to take advantage of its major asset—local civil society.

Competing Nationalisms

Kosovo was an important part of the medieval Serbian state. Ever since, it has been the focus of conflict between two competing nationalisms: Albanian and Serb.

During the Turkish occupation, most Albanians converted to Islam and found ways to coexist with the Ottoman regime. Many Serbs emigrated to northern parts of Serbia or to areas under control of the Hapsburgs.



Following the dissolution of the Ottoman Empire, Albanians hoped that Kosovo (as well as other adjacent areas with Albanian populations) would be united with the newly formed state of Albania. Instead these areas were divided between Serbia, Montenegro, and Macedonia. After World War II, Kosovo became a province within the Federal Republic of Serbia, which was part of Yugoslavia at the time.

Approximately 3.2 million Albanians presently live in Albania, 100,000 in Serbia, 50,000 in Montenegro, between 500,000 and 700,000 in Macedonia, and 1.8 million in Kosovo.

During the twentieth century, of the overall population in Kosovo, the Serbian population fell from 50 percent to 10 percent. (After World War II, there was a period of harsh anti-Albanian repression under Tito, but changes in the Yugoslav constitution established in 1974 granted Kosovo broad autonomy.)

Repression

Kosovo's autonomy came to an abrupt halt in the late 1980s as the nationalist president of Serbia, Slobodan Milosevic, built his campaign for a Greater Serbia. Aiming for Serbian unity within a Serbian state, he drew on the anti-Albanian sentiment in Serbia, as well as the Serbian minority in Kosovo.



Pro-Serb graffiti on a wall at the University of Prishtina

In 1989 Serbia suspended Kosovo's autonomy, taking control of the police and court system. In the following years, Serbia tried to alter the ethnic balance in Kosovo in favor of the Serbian population. Serbian refugees from the wars in Bosnia and Croatia, for example, were resettled in Kosovo.

The Albanian political structure of Kosovo was driven underground, and the Albanian economy marginalized. All public administration and publicly funded enterprises were placed under the direct control of the Serbian government.

Over 123,000 Albanian workers were fired from their positions in various fields, and they were forced to rely on farming, private businesses, smuggling, and foreign remittances in order to survive. Their old jobs were given to Serbian and Montenegrin immigrants, who eventually made up 70% of all industrial workers in Kosovo.

By mid-1995, half a million Albanians were facing food shortages. The Serbian authorities revised the lists of socially needy and struck off all Albanians, depriving almost 20,000 disabled Albanians of state support.

Educational opportunities for Albanians were also severely curtailed. Thousands of Albanian teachers and professors were dismissed from their jobs, the University of Prishtina was closed to Albanians, and all teachers were required to sign loyalty oaths. Most subjects were required to be taught in the Serbian language, with special emphasis given to Serbian history.



Serbian police with Albin Kurti, the Kosovar student leader, arrested during protests in late 1997. The students were demanding greater autonomy for Albanian language education.

After a while, a form of apartheid developed in Kosovo. Place names were changed into Serbian, swimming pools and discos in were for exclusive Serbian use, and use of the Serbian Cyrillic alphabet was made mandatory in public. Regulations were even passed forbidding people from the two ethnic backgrounds from selling real estate to each other (although in practice Serbs were free to buy from Albanians.)

Eventually, all the Intimidation and abuse became routine. The Albanian-language press was intimidated and in some cases banned. Journalists and human rights activists were harassed and jailed. Serbia hampered the distribution of humanitarian aid in Kosovo by international relief organizations.

In July 1993, a human rights monitoring team from the CSCE (now OSCE-the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe) was expelled. Meanwhile, incidents of police harassment, violence, and assassinations multiplied. The right to due process was often denied. Prosecution on the basis of ethnicity, imprisonment, torture and execution of activists while in detention were all widely documented by the Helsinki Watch Committee and other international human rights groups.

The Parallel Society and the Birth of Civic Action

In direct response to Serbian repression, the Albanians of Kosovo built their own system of government, known as the "parallel society."



Ibrahim Rugova, head of the LDK

The political foundation for the parallel society was laid in 1992, when the Albanians held clandestine multi-party elections and established an underground Parliament. The Democratic League of Kosovo (LDK), headed by Ibrahim Rugova, received 93% of the overall vote, and emerged as the dominant political party.

The first challenge was to fill the void left by the absence of government services, which had been denied to the Albanian population. The parallel administration established functional councils (environment, health, agricultural, education, human rights, etc.) that were composed of Albanian professionals that had been dismissed from their jobs. At one stage, doctors in the parallel system were treating 6,500 Albanians a day.

The entire apparatus was funded by a 3 percent tax that was levied on Albanians in Kosovo, and by contributions from the Albanian Diaspora. Claims have been made regarding mafia and drug money contributions, but ordinary Kosovars made a tremendous sacrifice to come up with 3 percent of their paltry income. Throughout ten long years, they found enough to provide professionals (doctors and teachers) with approximately 300 DM (\$150) every two or three months.

The real driving force behind the parallel society was volunteerism. Illustrated by the Mother Teresa Society (MTS), whose network of 636 community centers served as the delivery point for food aid, health care, and a range of other social services. The centers were staffed by 7,000 volunteers.

Similar stories could be found throughout the parallel society. On December 14, 1989 a group of eminent Kosovars established the Council for the Defense of Human Rights and Freedoms. By the mid-1990s, the Council had sub-branches in every community in Kosovo. Over 2,000 volunteers were monitoring violations and feeding it to the Council in Prishtina for distribution to the outside world.

Primary, secondary, and university classes were held in private homes and taught by unemployed teachers and professors. Their "salaries" were paid by Albanian parents. The parallel society also produced sports teams, cultural institutions, trade unions, and an independent marketing and tax system.

Many of those profiled in these pages came to prominence under the parallel society.

The handicapped suffered a great deal from the withdrawal of government services. Nevertheless, this helped create an incentive for Handikos--an association for the handicapped created by Halit Ferizior in the early 1980's.



Jak Mita, vice president of the Mother Teresa Society, with photographs of the MTS office which was destroyed by Serbian forces during the war.

Their first task was to update the lists of handicapped Kosovars. Halit Ferizi and his friends turned to the main Albanian political party (LDK) and joined with the Mother Teresa Society (MTS), as both had extensive contacts in the villages. Within weeks, they had identified a network of community representatives, who assessed the needs of the disabled and visited their homes.

By the time of the NATO campaign, 320 volunteers were working for the disabled in 25 local groups. This was a formidable achievement. In fact, in terms of support from their fellow citizens, handicapped Kosovars were probably more fortunate than their counterparts in many more developed societies.

Igballe (Igo) Rogova worked at a television station until she was fired in 1990. The following year, she helped found Motrat Qiriazhi, an organization for rural women activists. In 1995, the group decided to focus on improving the literacy of women in the region of Has, which borders Albania.

Has is rich in culture, but the people are desperately poor. The girls in particular are treated like property--readied for marriage before they even leave primary school. "Girls wanted literature classes," says Igo, "but this was difficult because the Serbian authorities had burned many Albanian language books."

"We encouraged publishing companies in Prishtina to reprint books in Albanian. It was a kind of cultural revolution. In two years, seven new libraries were built in the area where we were working. It was risky, but we were careful. The police didn't harass us too much, because they think that women are stupid." (Two of the libraries were burned during the NATO intervention.)



Nazlie Bala (left) is one of Kosovo's foremost human rights activists. In the early 1990s, Nazlie received six months of training in human rights field research at the United Nations in Geneva and in Norway. She then worked for five years as a field coordinator for the Council for the Defense of Human Rights and Freedoms in Kosovo, training locals in how to take statements and record violations.

By 1997 tensions were rising, and together with friends, Nazlie founded an organization ("Elena") to monitor violations against women. They also organized workshops in women's rights and held workshops for traumatized children.

Another prominent professional who responded to the crisis was Aferdita Kelmendi, one of Kosovo's most prominent radio journalists. In 1995 Aferdita created a Media Project to train young women journalists. The trainees learned graphics, layout, editing, and writing under her as they put together a magazine ('Eritrea'). On the wall of the room was a large poster, which read (in English): "I want. I know. I can."

There were countless examples of civic action that clearly showed the parallel society as more than administrative and political "structures" (councils, parliament, etc.), as it is often portrayed.

Rather it was a collective statement that the Albanians of Kosovo were determined to take control of their own lives, without resorting to violence.

The international community never took the time to understand this aspect of the parallel society, and how it might have contributed toward Kosovo's reconstruction. Yet it was at the heart of this unique and unprecedented achievement.

The Serbian Offensive

During the late 1990s, young Albanians grew restive and impatient with the campaign of non-violent resistance and began to turn to the Kosova Liberation Army (KLA). The Serbian response was furious and violent. In February 1998, Serbian forces attacked several villages in the region of Drenica, to the west of Prishtina. There, 80 villagers were killed. Thus began a year of growing violence, brutality, and displacement.

The crisis put enormous pressure on the parallel society. Instead of providing basic normal services, its members found themselves having to meet the growing emergency.

Peter Lippman and Teresa Crawford, both from the Advocacy Project, visited Kosovo in the spring of 1998 to work with the non-violent opposition movement. One of the groups they visited was the Center for the Protection of Women and Children in Prishtina. The Center had been founded in 1993 by two prominent doctors, Vjosa Dobruna and Sevdie Ahmeti, to provide medical support. By 1998 it was struggling to cope with the influx of refugees from Drenica. Peter noted in his diary:

"Fifteen women work at the Center, putting in long hours. They receive 50 to 70 visitors a day and hold two workshops a week, on such subjects as contraception and sexually transmitted diseases. Up to 60 people attend each workshop. Many of Prishtina's high school students have come through the Center.

"The Center serves both Albanian and Serbian women. There has been some discomfort on the part of the Albanians when Serbs 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."

The League of Albanian Women also opened a center after the massacres at Drenica, called the Center for the Rehabilitation of Women and Children in March 1998. Zahidi Zeqire, one of the organization's founders, recalled:

"Women began to come to our center to sleep and to get food. During this period we worked non-stop. 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 have stayed here and given birth. Only one of their children died."



Zahide Zeqiri

The founder of the League was a prominent pediatrician and human rights activist named Flora Brovina. Flora was highly visible during and after the Drenica offensive. She worked with displaced villagers, and along with other women activists helped to organize a solidarity march by thousands of women from Prishtina who tried to take food to refugees hiding in the church. The march was stopped and turned back by the Serbian police.

Flora paid a high price for her heroism. She was seized by the Serbian police during the NATO intervention and taken to Serbia, where she remained in jail for over 18 months.

All of these initiatives were a response to the repressive Serbian tactics, and in their own way they also strengthened civil society. On May 11, 1998, Aferdita Kelmendi (the radio journalist) and her husband Florin established a new radio station known as Radio 21. The airwaves were controlled by Serbian authorities, so Radio 21 turned to the internet. Using a donated computer, it put out a 15-minute program each day in Albanian and English, using Real Audio software. The program was picked up and rebroadcast on a BBC satellite.

Working under this kind of pressure gave the staff of Radio 21 valuable experience and ensured that the station would emerge as a leader of the media after the war.

“The Dogs Were our Radar” - Coping with War

In March 1998, 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, in an attempt to force Serbia to comply with the terms negotiated at Rambouillet.



Destruction in Peja

Sevdie Ahmeti, one of the founders of the Center for Protection of Women and Children, was one who stayed in Prishtina throughout the NATO intervention:

"It would have been incorrect for me, as a human rights worker, to leave Kosovo. But what we experienced can't be described. I've seen things like that in the movies. It was hell."



Sevdie Ahmeti, in December 1999

"We would watch from behind our curtain to see what was going on in the streets. Only old people and women went out. After noon, there was no one in the streets, no one to be seen. Cars without license plates drove around. No one spoke loudly. The dogs barked all day. They were like our radar, a sign that the NATO planes were coming."

"Early one morning masked people broke in our door. Because of the noise, we thought it was a NATO bomb. They shouted, 'Police!' There were three men. One stayed at the door. They had machine guns and knives. The police hit me

on the back. It was painful. They were hitting us and demanding hard currency. They broke my brother-in-law's ribs. They tortured him, then my husband, and then me. It was two hours of torture-you can imagine what they did."

"They then ordered us to leave the country. We sent our children to another place, and I separated from my husband. I dyed my hair and covered my head like a villager. After 10 days of fear, some friends came to help me. They fed me and reunited me with my husband.

"My house was broken into nine times. They took our computer, our VCR, camera, and many valuable things. They also came to the office. They didn't steal equipment, but they took my papers, notebooks, and very valuable material."

"You'll see a difference between the people who left and those who stayed. I'm very happy to see that people are coming back. But even a small noise makes me tremble. Everyone writes about the refugees who left the country, but what about the 700,000 who remained inside? They are forgotten."

Another of those who remained was Marte Prenkpalaj. Marte was working in the region of Has, which was one of the first to be cleared by Serbian forces. Dhe, and others, watched from a hill opposite while the attackers arrived at the village of Krusha e vogel. They saw men being rounded up and killed. The women and children were driven down to the river.



Marte Prenkpalaj

Marte took a tractor, drove it across the river, and started to pick up the panic-stricken women. When they saw this, others from her village rushed down to join her. They managed to rescue scores of villagers and took them along when they too abandoned their own village.

Civil Society in Exile

Following the outbreak of NATO bombing, the Serbian authorities began to expel large numbers of Albanians from their homes. Almost a million refugees streamed into Macedonia, Albania, and Montenegro. They included most of the activists who had been prominent in the parallel society.

Igo Rogova, from the women's group Motrat Qiriazhi, was one of them. When the NATO bombing began, 37 members of her family had crowded into the family house in Prishtina. They waited while the Serbian militia methodically went from street to street, forcing Albanians out. Eventually it was their turn.

Igo faced down the Serb attackers and assumed responsibility for helping her terrified relatives reach the border. It was typical of the way women hold society together in war. Usually, they have no choice, because husbands and sons are the first to be killed or detained. War brings out qualities of leadership and management in women.

'Disabled people were picked up and tossed about like sacks. Wheelchairs were abandoned.'

Serbian paramilitaries came for Halit Ferizi, the inspiring president of Handikos, on March 30 and ordered him out of his home. Halit drove to the border with his niece, who was expecting a child. They were separated, and he found himself in a massive convoy of cars that was ordered to return to Prishtina. Somehow he managed to slip away and made it across the border. Along the way he saw horror. 'Disabled people were picked up and tossed about like sacks. Wheelchairs were abandoned.'

It was a devastating experience, more so because it was occurring in the heart of Europe. Middle-class Kosovars suddenly found themselves uprooted from their homes, packed into cattle trucks that were reminiscent of the Nazi death camps, taken to the border, and pushed into Macedonia.

The Macedonians were anything but welcoming. Worried that the influx of so many Albanians would destabilize the delicate ethnic balance within Macedonia, they kept the refugees at the border crossing of Blace in mud, cold, and filth for days. Emptying the camp overnight, the Macedonians added to the trauma by splitting up families. Under international pressure, the Macedonians yielded and permitted the construction of refugee camps-while making intensive efforts to force the refugees to continue on to Albania.

There was, however, a positive-even uplifting-aspect of this crisis. Once they found temporary safety in the camps, many activists picked up where they had left off in Kosovo and turned to helping their compatriots. Being a natural organizer, Igo Rogova started training women and organizing singing and dancing in the camps:

"We tried to lift spirits. It started in tents, and later moved to public meetings. We found a comedian and started giving children's shows. The numbers of spectators increased, and we began giving shows for the adults, too. Some of the elders in the camp did not approve, saying that we should be quiet and mourn. We did not listen to them."

While Sevdie Ahmeti was trying to survive in Kosovo, her fellow directors of the Center for the Protection of Women and Children were re-establishing the Center in Tetovo, the predominantly Albanian city in Macedonia near the capital Skopje.



Melihate Juniku: painting helped the children deal with trauma

Melihate Juniku, the co-director of the Center, recalled:

"We tried to help women with gynecological and pediatric problems. We offered reproductive services, as well as a psychosocial program for children. They drew pictures about their feelings and pictures of a free Kosovo. We worked in the camps, together with the League of Albanian Women."

"We also offered refugees the use of our telephone so that they could find out information about their families. We 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. It was most difficult for the teenage girls."

The staff at Radio 21 was clearly at risk if they remained in Kosovo during the NATO bombing. Aferdita Kelmendi and her husband Florin left for Skopje eight days after the bombing began.



Florin at Radio 21

But by June, Radio 21 was again transmitting from exile, for 2.5 hours a day. The programs were sent via internet to Radio Nederland, a Dutch radio station, transmitted by short wave and rebroadcast on the web. Florin Kelmendi chuckled as he recalled it: "Only people who were truly in love with radio would do that." But it paid off. Radio 21's website attracted an astounding 2.3 million visitors in 1999.

War Crimes Give Campaigners a Target

When Serbian forces withdrew from Kosovo, they left behind death, destruction, and despair. Michael Stechow, who worked for the International Crisis Group in Gjakova/Djakovica, remembers the scene when he first arrived in the town. Human heads were turning up among the garbage. Eventually people began to bury their own dead, while trying to note any details that could help war crimes investigators. The Hague tribunal received reports of 11,334 bodies in 529 gravesites throughout Kosovo. Very few villages had emerged unscathed.



Fresh graves in Gjakova

Adding to the trauma, over 1,500 Kosovo Albanians had been seized by Serbian forces and taken to prisons in Serbia. Some of those detained were prominent civic leaders like Flora Brovina (head of the League of Albanian Women) and Albin Kurti (the Kosovar student leader). Others just happened to be in the wrong place at the wrong time. They even included a six-year-old child, Sabri Musliu.

Perhaps paradoxically, the immensity of these crimes gave civil society in Kosovo a renewed sense of purpose. The Humanitarian Law Center was founded in Belgrade in 1992 and opened a branch in Prishtina in 1996. This allowed the Center to work on both sides of the troubled frontier following the Serbian withdrawal.



Kosovare Kelmendi

The Center's founder, Natasa Kandic, is one of the few Serbians who commands wide respect in Kosovo. Her colleague, Kosovare Kelmendi, who heads the Prishtina branch of the Humanitarian Law Center, is also well known in Kosovo. The night after NATO bombing began, intruders dragged her father, Bajram, a noted human rights lawyer, and two of her brothers out of their house. Kosovare discovered their bodies by the side of a road two days later. (Bajram's widow-Kosovare's mother-heads the Judiciary Department set up under the U.N. administration in Kosovo.)

Under Natasa Kandic and Kosovare Kelmendi, the Center exploited its ability to work on both sides of the frontier. It began to investigate those who were missing in Kosovo and those detained in Serbian jails. Once a prisoner was confirmed as alive in a Serbian jail, another name could be struck off the list of missing. Taking advantage of the office in Belgrade, the Center's lawyers also made an effort to visit as many detainees as possible.

The work was dangerous and difficult. Center staff were repeatedly threatened and on occasions even kidnapped. The lawyers were unable to visit military prisons. Even when visits were permitted, the Serbian authorities required written permission from the prisoner's family in Kosovo and did not allow interpreters in the jails. This was a problem for the Albanian prisoners who did not speak Serbian. Guards listened in on the conversations between lawyer and prisoner.

Many other Kosovar groups began organizing around war crimes in the immediate aftermath of war. The Council for the Defense of Human Rights and Freedoms had been prominent in the parallel society, but the network collapsed in the war. Recording war crimes provided it with a new mission. Several other local groups also assisted at exhumations-sometimes on their own, sometimes working with the Hague tribunal.



Tahil Demaj, vice president of the Peja branch of the Council for the Defense of Human Rights and Freedoms

If war crimes galvanized Kosovar activists, they also mobilized ordinary people (if such a term is appropriate) all over the world. Alice Mead, an author of children's books, first visited Kosovo in 1994 armed with a camera. In 1998, she co-founded the Kosova Action Network. With the outbreak of war, she began working tirelessly to generate interest and support for the Kosovars.

In September 1999, the Network joined forces with Naida Dukaj, 23, an Albanian American who runs the Kosova Humanitarian Aid Organization in between working in her father's machine tool factory in California. Together, Naida and Alice collect all the information available on prisoners and issue it in the form of a weekly newsletter.

Alice, Naida, and many others kept up a drumbeat of pressure on the United Nations, the European Union, and the U.S. government. Initially, there was very little response or enthusiasm. But the campaigners kept hammering away, stressing the injustice, and keeping the issue alive.



Demonstrators in Prishtina holding pictures of the missing. They included Doctor Flora Brovina, who was released in late 2000 after over a year in prison.

They were particularly forceful with UNMIK, which did not want to pick any new quarrels with Serbia. UNMIK formed a working group to coordinate action on the prisoners among its sprawling components, and Bernard Kouchner, head of UNMIK, became steadily more forceful in his comments. Shukrie Rexha, who heads the Association of Political Prisoners (APP) in Prishtina, was invited to attend meetings of the Kosovo Transitional Council (KTC), set up by the United Nations.

The Hague tribunal should have been a powerful partner for the campaigners. Set up in 1993, the tribunal has an open-ended mandate and can investigate crimes anywhere in the former Yugoslavia-including Kosovo. But it proved a disappointment for many campaigners in Kosovo.

In May 1999 the tribunal's then-Prosecutor, Louise Arbour, indicted Slobodan Milosevic, the Yugoslav president, and four senior members of his government for directing the ethnic cleansing of Kosovo. Arbour also mounted a huge investigation in Kosovo itself, deploying 16 international forensic teams.

In spite of this, the prosecutor also announced that she had no intention of prosecuting those who had actually committed the war crimes in Kosovo. That would be left to the U.N.-administered system of justice in Kosovo.

This was a staggering blow to groups like the Humanitarian Law Center in Prishtina because the justice system in Kosovo was being slowly and painfully rebuilt. The United Nations made it clear that any judicial capacity would be used to punish and prevent new crimes-particularly attacks on minorities. Past crimes were less of a priority.

This spurred the campaigners to greater efforts. Under pressure, UNMIK began exploring the possibility of creating a Kosovo war crimes tribunal with international judges and lawyers to handle war crimes.

The Humanitarian Law Center also pressed the Hague tribunal to reach out to grieving relatives. Tribunal officials sometimes plead that they must remain neutral and discreet. But the sensational and highly political nature of the Tribunal's work-not to mention the psychological impact of exhumations on communities-has always made it much more than a legal instrument.

Not that publicity and outreach were the solution. The tribunal could open all the graves in Kosovo and spread its message far and wide. But, said relatives, until there was some assurance that war criminals would be brought to justice, its efforts would count for little.

The Humanitarian Invasion

The UN Mission in Kosovo (UNMIK) was created by Resolution 1244 of the U.N. Security Council (June 10, 1999). Its task was to restore stability and security and administer the province until such time as its long-term status could be resolved.

It is hard to imagine a tougher assignment. Albanians were thirsting for revenge as a result of the crimes committed by Serbian forces, and within weeks thousands of Serbs had fled the province. On July 12, 14 Serb farmers were executed at the village of Gracko, near Prishtina.

The war also left the population deeply divided about the province's future. Albanians wanted independence, but Serbs wanted to be part of Serbia. Somehow, UNMIK would have to create common goals while avoiding a commitment on Kosovo's future.

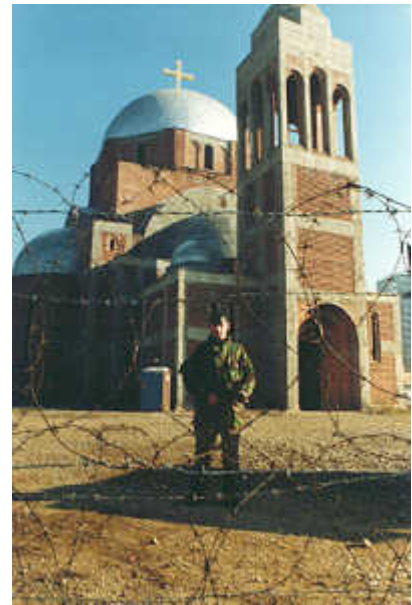
UNMIK also faced a daunting challenge in the ruins of Kosovo. Garbage was piled high in the streets. The two power stations were barely functioning. Some 60,000 houses needed repair. The justice system had to be rebuilt from scratch.

UNMIK's first task was to get itself organized. Formally, the mission was divided into four "pillars," each of which was run by a different institution. The four pillars were Humanitarian (under the U.N. High Commissioner for Refugees); Civil Administration (the United Nations); Economic (European Union); and Institution-Building (OSCE). In addition, NATO deployed roughly 40,000 troops in its Kosovo Force (KFOR).



Late arrival: UN police with Kosovo police trainees

Some of the pillars came together more quickly than others. One important component of civil administration was the U.N. civilian police (CIVPOL). They would have the task of training a local police force and taking over law enforcement as KFOR withdrew. But CIVPOL had to be recruited in their home countries, and after two months only 200 had arrived in Kosovo. It would be months before the first Kosovar police emerged from training school.



A British soldier protecting the unfinished Serbian Orthodox church in Prishtina

The humanitarian pillar, in contrast, took shape within days because it could draw on experienced staff from the U.N. High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) whose staff were working in the refugee camps.

Earlier in these pages, it was argued that Kosovar civil society had much to contribute to reconstruction. If this were to happen, it would start with emergency relief.

Some effort was made to strengthen those Kosovar groups that were indispensable to the relief operation. For example, the UNHCR invested in the Mother Teresa Society, because it needed the MTS network of centers for distributing emergency aid.

But in general, the international agencies devoted little attention to building the capacity of Kosovar groups. Instead, they relied on international nongovernmental organizations (NGOs). At one stage, no fewer than 285 international NGOs were working in Kosovo—a huge number for an area the size of the state of Connecticut.

Kosovar organizations complained of the crush of international vehicles, the pollution, and spiraling inflation. They were particularly critical of the way that international agencies hired their best people at irresistible salaries and then put them to work on jobs with little responsibility—as drivers, guards, or interpreters. Handikos, the association of handicapped, lost ten of its best employees this way.

In another example, Nazlie Bala was recruited by the OSCE as a local interpreter, which meant that she was prevented from even interviewing victims. Given that Nazlie was arguably one of Kosovo's most experienced human rights activists, with more hands-on experience than OSCE's international officials, this was a wasted opportunity.

International NGOs also made the mistake of underestimating Kosovars. Motrat Qiriazhi, the women's group, opened a new women's center in the Albanian part of Mitrovica in September 1999. Two months later an Italian aid agency (ADAB—Associazione Per le Donne Dell'area Dei Balkani) opened an identical women's center next door without even informing Igo Rogova. ADAB began to solicit clients on the street, causing great distress.

Igo Rogova was thoroughly disillusioned by many international aid donors:

"It follows the same pattern. You spend a lot of time helping them develop projects. At first, they're friendly. But gradually they forget their principles and start to change. They become the boss and claim the projects—without so much as a thank you. I feel like I'm in a colony!"

Igo was equally scathing about a multi-million dollar American aid program known as the Kosovo Women's Initiative (KWI). Modelled on a similar program in Bosnia, it sought to pump \$10 million dollars into "women's projects."

KWI was the kind of project that makes a donor feel good, but it infuriated leading women like Igo because the money went through UNHCR, and three international NGOs ("umbrella agencies") before it reached local groups. In addition, the entire fund was to be disbursed by the end of 1999. Even the strongest women's groups, like Motrat Qiriazhi, lacked the management capacity to spend large sums in a short time. (The KWI deadline was subsequently extended to the end of 2000).

Igo Rogova could not understand why Kosovar groups could not be entrusted with the money directly. She also felt that the UNHCR and the United States made a major mistake by announcing the KWI with a flourish. Several new women's groups formed with no other purpose than to apply for KWI money. Looked at from afar this might have given the impression of a vibrant civil society. But these new NGOs would be entirely dependent on a fund that would soon be exhausted. In the meantime, they would have to handle the administrative heavy requirements that came with being an NGO.

The backlash was not long in coming. UNHCR received applications from two of Kosovo's most prominent women-Aferdita Kelmendi of Radio 21 and Sevdie Ahmeti of the Center for the Project of Women and Children. The amounts requested were too large for the groups to manage, and UNHCR tried to engage them in a discussion. But the two women took umbrage and complained to the powerful chairman of a Senate committee that authorizes U.S. foreign aid. The committee instantly froze all U.S. funds for UNHCR's entire Balkans program.

This was an irresponsible move by the U.S. Senate. But it showed how unstable the relationship between the relief agencies and local civic groups had become in Kosovo-and how difficult it was to move from emergency aid programs like the KWI to longer-term development.