

REFUGEES

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Vincent Cochetel
INTERVIEW

Rising from the ashes?

1999 A year of decision
in the Balkans

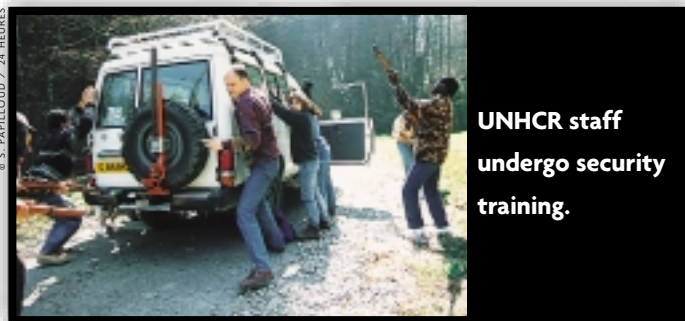


UNHCR
United Nations
High Commissioner
for Refugees

Targetting the helpers...

Just before Christmas last year, UNHCR staff member Vincent Cochetel was freed after being held hostage for 317 days in Chechnya. We chronicle his ordeal elsewhere in this magazine, but the gruesome details of his kidnap serve to underline the increasing threat facing aid workers throughout the world.

1998 was more dangerous than most. In that period 22 civilian U.N. workers were killed during the course of their work (five officials also died in the crash of Swissair flight 111). Eight others were held hostage and subsequently released. In the last seven years, 160 U.N. civilian personnel have been killed. More than 90 percent of those deaths were never adequately investigated and no one was brought to trial. Non-governmental aid agencies suffered similar casualties.



This situation will continue until either humanitarian workers refuse to go to volatile areas, or influential governments give the problem the attention it deserves. Until now, it has barely registered on the radar screen in government or media offices.

Consider: It was not until January 15 of this year that the 1994 Convention on the Safety of United Nations and Associated Personnel gained the 22 government ratifications (New Zealand was the 22nd signatory) needed to enter into force. Only three states have contributed modest amounts to the Trust Fund established by the U.N. to provide security training for humanitarian personnel.

Why has aid work become so dangerous? Humanitarian organizations such as UNHCR which often worked on the periphery of crises in the past, more and more now operate in the middle of conflict zones where there is little law and order. Protagonists are often a tricky mix of insurgents, terrorists and irregular forces, combatants who neither know or care about international humanitarian law or the aid workers trying to succor victims.

Ironically, impartiality can be as much of a risk factor as perceived partiality. Helping people on one side, no matter how innocent, may make an aid worker an enemy of the other. Humanitarian groups support Criminal Tribunals such as the two established to cover the former Yugoslavia and Rwanda, but there can be a downside. People suspected of war crimes may preemptively target the perceived witnesses – humanitarian workers.

There are other dangers, too: the problem of working amidst millions of unexploded land-mines in Kosovo or Angola and the impact of instant satellite news on crises in even the remotest parts of the globe. Information, opinion, condemnation on a given situation made at a faraway headquarters in Europe or North America can be relayed immediately – and reacted to just as quickly, by combatants who often see field workers as spies.

Humanitarian operations have become a key component of the international response to crises and even a substitute for political action. U.N. Secretary-General Kofi Annan said humanitarian involvement is too often a fig leaf, hiding a lack of political will to address the root causes of conflict. At times humanitarians work where governments consider it too risky to send better trained, better equipped and better protected peacekeepers.

Humanitarian action is frequently the lowest common denominator on which consensus can be reached. But in such a situation, the growing risk of doing good threatens the very foundation of humanitarian work.



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Cover: Fire and destruction in the Sarajevo suburb of Grbavica in 1996.
UNHCR / L. SENIGALLIESI

Insert: Vincent Cochetel arrives in Moscow after his release from kidnap.
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UNHCR / R. LEMOYNE



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Reconstruction work gets underway near the disputed town of Brcko in Bosnia-Herzegovina.

A DECISIVE YEAR

Hundreds of thousands of people are still waiting to go home, but time is running out in Bosnia

by Ray Wilkinson

The bloodstains from the massacre have seeped forever into the cold concrete floors of the farmhouse cellar and stairwell. Amra points almost distractedly to the telltale signs of death as she remembers the Croat attack on the village of Ahmici in central Bosnia in April, 1993. She ran out of the building and into the nearby woods as the Croat gunmen, some of them neighbors for generations, burst into the hilltop village in the first blush of dawn.

More than 100 persons were killed in a one hour massacre by the marauding thugs, elderly, retarded and children alike. The youngest was a three-month-old baby burned alive in an oven. The oldest was 96-years-old. Nine persons were slaughtered and their bodies burned in Amra's own home. When British soldiers uncovered the attack and television footage flashed the horror around the world, Ahmici instantly became one of the most infamous atrocities of the conflict in the former Yugoslavia.

Today, Ahmici is again a symbol. An experiment being carried out there and in hundreds of other regions which are trying to knit together old communities will eventually determine whether Bosnia and Herzegovina can ever forge a viable and lasting peace among its ethnic groups.

The area around Ahmici and the nearest large town of Vitez had been predominantly Muslim, or Bosniak, before the war, with a sizeable Croat minority. As the fighting turned increasingly bitter and many communities, Serb, Croat and Bosniak, tried to carve out ethnically pure enclaves, villages such as Ahmici be- ▶

UNICER / C. SHIRLEY

► came killing fields. Today there is a new reality in the Vitez area bearing testimony to the results of those wartime campaigns; the majority of the population is Croat with a minority of Bosniaks.

Despite this reversal and the obvious dangers posed if hostilities ever resume, Amra (not her real name) and around 150 other Bosniaks earlier this year put their nightmares aside and returned home after living for five years as virtual nomads. UNHCR and other international agencies helped renovate several dozen village houses, providing new roofs, windows and stoves to facilitate the villagers return. Twelve children have begun attending school in a basement.

"I am happy simply to have survived," the 43-year-old Amra says, eventually breaking into tears as she recalled the earlier attack. "You know, my father-in-law was an invalid who could not run away from the attackers. And three young girls were among those killed here. The healing will take time. It will be difficult."

Croat municipal officials were on hand to welcome the Bosniaks home and an elder, Fuad, said the village was further delighted when one Croat was recently extradited to The Hague to face trial for alleged war crimes in connection with the attack. Other Croat neighbors still live at the bottom of the hill, but the two communities do not speak to each other. Conspicuously, the village mosque which was blown up by the attackers remains a heap of rubble. "Not even the babies will ever forget what happened here," says Fuad.

A NEW BEGINNING

Yugoslavia, a nation once considered the most progressive in the post World War Two communist bloc and a founding member of the world non-aligned movement, began to split apart in 1991 as ethnic divisions deteriorated and the Republics of Croatia and Slovenia declared independence from the Federation. War ensued between Belgrade and Zagreb and spread to Bosnia and Herzegovina when Sarajevo also opted for independence in 1992.

Nearly three million people fled their homes at the height of the crisis, 700,000 becoming refugees in Europe and other regions and the rest internally displaced within the old Federation. As the lead humanitarian agency, UNHCR at one point was helping 3.5 million war victims — refugees, the internally displaced and oth-

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One year after the Srebrenica massacres, the names of "disappeared" persons are displayed on individual pieces of cloth in the Bosnian town of Tuzla.

"Everyone believed they were going to die...."

Louis Gentile worked in Srebrenica during the siege of that enclave and for the first time in five years recently revisited the scene to confront a personal nightmare:

It is four days before Christmas and still dark as we climb into the hills around Sarajevo and head for Srebrenica.

There is no avoiding it now. I will soon be in a place associated with the worst crime in Europe since the Second World

War, a place where, in 1993, I had witnessed hell on earth and then naively believed that the international community had finally stopped the killings instead of just standing by and watching another slaughter.



UNNICK / H.J. DAVIES

It has been more than five years since I left Srebrenica and on this day I have still not come to terms with what I had seen there nor with what has happened there since.

The closer I get the more apprehensive I feel. For the past few weeks in London I have been waking up in the middle of the night in a cold sweat. I know why I'm having nightmares but can't remember a single detail once I'm awake.

I re-read my old notes from Srebrenica. One entry from April 14: "Although I have witnessed many terrible scenes in Srebrenica...nothing I have ever seen compares to the events of April 12 in terms of sheer horror. At approximately 14:15 a barrage of shelling, clearly intended

to target civilians, landed directly on the town.

"Body parts and human flesh clung to the schoolyard fence and the ground is literally soaked with blood. I saw two ox carts covered with bodies, and what remained of bodies, being wheeled into the hospital. Total casualties were 56 dead and approximately 100 wounded.

"Suffice, to say, I did not look forward to closing my eyes at night for fear that I would relive the images of a nightmare that was not a dream."

AN IMPOSSIBLE JOURNEY

In less than three hours we make the journey from Sarajevo that would have been impossible during the war and I think back to the first time I entered this place: The main street was crowded with people waving, blowing kisses, thousands of smiling children shouting thank you. Forty thousand people were crammed into a town which had once accommodated 8,000.

Everyone believed they were going to die unless they managed to be evacuated. That panic dissipated when the Security Council declared the enclave a 'safe area' and I recall a Canadian officer telling me his troops had a moral obligation to defend the population, but he was unsure they had the means to do so if the town came under renewed attack.

Nobody who was in Srebrenica in 1993 is there today. All were subsequently expelled or massacred in July 1995, when the 'safe area' fell to the Bosnian Serbs. And it's clear to me now that although I'm officially returning to write an article, I've really come back to mourn.

The majority of today's inhabitants are displaced Serbs from places like Sarajevo. The town is run by a small group of 'powerful locals.' The return of Bosniaks is not a possibility according to one international official here. The economy is a disaster.

I walk through the town in the rain, past the schoolhouse playground where children were killed while playing football on April 12, 1993. I have no words. At Cafe 171 a group of local young men say they have no jobs and they all hope to leave.

Nowhere do I ask the questions I really want to ask: Who participated in the 1995 killings? Who can confirm who was killed to ease the grief of mothers, daughters, wives? How can you live in this blood drenched, cursed place after everything that has happened here?

A GLIMMER OF HOPE

Marinko Sekulic was a Serb journalist at Radio Srebrenica for 27 years before the war and his parents and brother returned there last year. In a chat in nearby Tuzla we discuss what happened there and he leaves me with a small glimmer of hope for a more tolerant future when he says some of the original inhabitants would like to see their Bosniak neighbors back. But these people are mostly elderly and those who control the town today rule through intimidation.

A young woman named Mirzoda recounts the fall of Srebrenica and the three nights she spent in Potocari clutching her baby tightly while her father and husband fled into the woods, never to be seen again.

She begs us to check among those detained and as I'm to discover, many Srebrenica survivors hope their men, missing for three years, are still alive, still detained somewhere. But none of the rumored detention centers have turned out to be true.

It is probable that all 7,396 missing are dead. The fate of only 49 has been clarified and their remains returned to families. The work of identifying other remains from mass graves continues, but staff at Physicians for Human Rights believe only a tiny minority will ever be identified.

I recognize one young woman who used to work as a cleaner at the post office building where I lived and she remembers me. I ask after someone we knew but "he never arrived." Another woman says, "Everything good vanished in one hour of one day, my son, my husband, my brother and my house."

There are people in Srebrenica who know exactly what happened to their families but I have no answers to their questions. "Why couldn't the killings be stopped after the first day when 1,000 or more were executed? If you had protected us in 1993 why didn't you continue until the end? If you'd just left us alone maybe a few thousand of us would have died fleeing in 1993, but not as many as were slaughtered in 1995."

I'm grateful to have had the chance to see Srebrenica again, and even more grateful to leave it behind. Alone in my hotel room I mourn for the dead and for those who are still waiting for loved ones who will never come. Srebrenica. ■

► ers – with everything from flour, salt and sanitary supplies to blankets, stoves, wood and multi-purpose plastic sheeting. A UN-HCR airlift which developed into the longest humanitarian airbridge in history, kept the Bosnian capital of Sarajevo alive through three winters.

But cities, towns, villages and huge swathes of land were ethnically cleansed. As many as 200,000 persons were reportedly killed in Bosnia alone, many of them civilians. The country's economic infrastructure – factories, bridges, roads, water and electricity plants – were destroyed. Sixty percent of the country's homes, 50 percent of its schools and 30 percent of hospitals were either reduced to rubble or badly damaged before the worst European war in 50 years was halted and Presidents Alija Izetbegovic of Bosnia and Herzegovina, Slobodan Milosevic of Serbia and Franjo Tudjman of Croatia initialed the Dayton Peace Accords on November 21, 1995 at the Wright Patterson Air Force Base in the United States.

Dayton was to signal a new beginning.

Serbs surrendered some of the territory they had captured, establishing their Republika Srpska in 49 percent of Bosnia. An earlier established Bosniak-Croat Federation controlled the rest of the country. Both, theoretically at least, came under a

Helping 'minorities' has become the most complex and difficult problem facing Bosnia today.

central multi-ethnic authority in Sarajevo. Their armies returned to barracks and more than 30,000 NATO and other international troops arrived to police the peace. A \$5.1 billion international reconstruction package for 1996-99 helped rebuild at least parts of the shattered infrastructure. General and municipal elections were held in the last three years and more

are planned. Some indicted war criminals were transferred to The Hague to stand trial at the United Nations War Crimes Tribunal.

The key to any enduring peace throughout the region, however, will be the successful return and reintegration of the millions of people uprooted by the conflict. Since 1996 a total of 310,000 refugees returned to Bosnia and a further 250,000 displaced persons went home.

But at the start of 1999, there were still 400,000 Bosnian refugees and 800,000 displaced persons waiting to restart their lives.

Those bald statistics tell only part of the tale. 1998 was declared The Year of Return, but only 100,000 refugees, less than half the official target, went home. More worrying still, during this period only 30,000 people – refugees and internally displaced persons – returned to their old homes in areas which are now controlled by a different ethnic group. Humanitarian officials believe the large majority of the 1.2 million people still waiting to return home fall into this latter category.

Helping these 'minorities' has become

The price of war: Ruined houses in the Gradacac region of Bosnia, 1996.



UNHCR / A. HOLLMANN

the most complex and difficult problem facing Bosnia today with deteriorating domestic economic conditions, turmoil in other parts of the region, the continued opposition of extremists in Bosnia and almost impenetrable bureaucratic systems all conspiring to undermine progress.

THE YEAR OF MINORITY RETURN

Some international officials nevertheless have declared 1999 The Year of Minority Return and targeted 120,000 minorities to go home. Given that only a quarter of that number succeeded in returning in 1998, there is already a lively debate whether the 1999 figure can be met.

"1998 was very disappointing and 1999 cannot be just another year," one senior UNHCR field official said. "The obstacles to minority return have become clearer and more intractable, but somehow they must be overcome. This may be our last chance. If there is not a major breakthrough in the coming months then we will have to reexamine the reality on the ground."

A December, 1998 meeting of the multi-nation Peace Implementation Council, the organization effectively overseeing the political and economic rebuilding of Bosnia, recognized the urgency of pushing the process forward as quickly as possible. It approved a two-year package of measures to reform the economy, strengthen government institutions, create an independent judiciary and multi-ethnic police units and encourage the continued return of refugees.

Carlos Westendorp, the international community's High Representative in Bosnia, was given additional powers to combat the continuing efforts of ultra-nationalists among all the ethnic groups to block progress. "A lasting peace within Bosnia and Herzegovina is starting to take root," the conference noted, but it added that "there is still much work to be done....and without the scaffolding of international support (Bosnia) would collapse."

The successful return of refugees and internally displaced people depends on a series of interlocking international, regional and local initiatives. The breakdown of just one link anywhere in the chain could disrupt the entire process.

In a global context, Bosnia receives one of the largest aid packages of any country in the world but huge areas, especially in Serb-controlled regions, remain without

THE BALKAN CONFLICT AT A GLANCE

June 25, 1991:

Croatia and Slovenia proclaim independence from the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia. War begins immediately and rebel Serbs backed by the Yugoslav army overrun 30 percent of Croatia's territory.

October 8, 1991:

Yugoslavia asks for UNHCR's assistance and two weeks later the U.N. Secretary-General designates the organization as the lead humanitarian agency in the crisis.

January 2, 1992:

The Sarajevo Accord establishes the first lasting cease-fire in the war in Croatia.

January 15, 1992:

The European Community recognizes the independence of Croatia and Slovenia.

February 21, 1992:

The U.N. Security Council authorizes the deployment of the U.N. Protection Force (UNPROFOR) in Croatia. It is later deployed to Bosnia as well.

March 3, 1992:

Bosnia and Herzegovina proclaims independence. Bosnian Serbs lay siege to the capital, Sarajevo and seize 70 percent of the country's territory

July 3, 1992:

UNHCR Sarajevo airlift, which eventually will become the longest-running humanitarian airbridge in history, gets underway. At the height of the conflict in the following two years UNHCR and other agencies assist as many as 3.5 million people throughout the former Yugoslavia. An estimated 700,000 Bosnian refugees flee and another two million people are internally displaced.

January 11, 1993:

Peace talks on the Vance-Owen plan start in Geneva.

February 27, 1993:

Airdrop operations began to provide assistance to besieged enclaves.

May 6, 1993:

U.N. Security Council Resolution 824 declares Sarajevo, Tuzla, Zepa, Gorazde, Bihac and Srebrenica as 'safe areas' but the military situation on the ground remains unchanged.

July 11, 1995:

Srebrenica falls to Serb forces setting the stage for the massacre of thousands of persons in the worst single atrocity in Europe since World War II.

August 12, 1995:

Croatia launches Operation Storm and retakes the Krajina area from rebel Serbs. 170,000 Serbs flee.

November 21, 1995:

Dayton Peace Agreement covering the end of hostilities and the return of refugees to Bosnia and Herzegovina is initialled and one month later the NATO-led Implementation Force deploys to the region.

January 9, 1996:

The longest humanitarian airlift in world history which fed Sarajevo for 3 1/2 years, ends.

September 14, 1996:

Bosnia and Herzegovina's first post war elections confirm wartime hard-line leaders in power, dashing hopes for a speedy return of refugees.

January 15, 1998:

Eastern Slavonia, captured by the Yugoslav army in the early part of the war returns to Croatian sovereignty following the departure of the U.N. Transitional Authority (UNTAES).

March, 1998:

Fighting erupts in Serbia's Kosovo province between Albanian separatists and Yugoslav forces, setting off a new wave of displacement. By September 350,000 people have fled abroad or become internally displaced.

October 27, 1998:

Yugoslav President Slobodan Milosevic bows to NATO military pressure and agrees to a cease-fire and a partial pull-out of Yugoslav military and police forces from Kosovo. The Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) sends the first of 2,000 verifiers to monitor the agreement.

February 23, 1999:

Tentative agreement on substantial autonomy for Kosovo reached in Rambouillet, France. ■

water, electricity or homes. The December meeting in Madrid put Sarajevo on notice that this help will not continue indefinitely, but unless the overall economy can be revived and multinational companies rather than governments convinced to invest in the near future, those areas will remain no-go zones and refugees will not return. Even the fragile peace will last only as long as foreign troops remain, observers say.

Regional political and military developments also directly influence refugee flows. A wider conflict in Kosovo could produce new waves of refugees in Bosnia and further afield, disrupting that country's own refugee return. Decisions taken in Belgrade, Zagreb or Sarajevo often produce a domino effect throughout the region. If, for instance, national or local governments hinder or block the return of ethnic minorities in one place, this produces a knock-on effect in a second area where other ►



UNHCR / L. SENGALLIES

Two women embrace after meeting for the first time in four years in Sarajevo in 1996.

▶ refugees from a different ethnic group, are blocked in retaliation. The same is true because of housing shortages throughout the region – the lack of shelter in one area directly slows return in others.

A MISSION IMPOSSIBLE

On the ground the situation, if not quite Mission Impossible, is nevertheless horrendously complex. Most of Bosnia’s population of four million remains deeply traumatized by the war years, by the death of close family members often at the hands of longtime neighbors, by the destruction of their homes and work places and an entire way of life. Doctors and analysts believe that trying to come to terms with a very uncertain present and future could be even more difficult than the wartime experiences and take many years.

In trying to promote minority returns, senior protection officer Volker Turk pointed out that UNHCR today still has to negotiate with hard-line officials on all sides who were responsible for promoting ethnic cleansing in the first place. Though most of these ultra-nationalists pay lip service to the Dayton Accords and High Rep-

resentative Carlos Westendorp has the authority to remove troublemakers, they have become skilled in hindering the return process.

“Their weapon is generally no longer the gun, but red tape,” Turk said. “At the very top and at the very start of the process we have to deal with 13 different constitutions and 13 different legal systems, all with their own rules and idiosyncrasies. Then, all the way down from the highest government office in Sarajevo to the local municipality there are opportunities to delay, divert and destroy. We are on constantly shifting sands and bureaucratic warfare is proving more effective even than guerrilla warfare.”

And when administrative maneuverings do fail, extremists revert to terror. Returnees have been murdered in their own homes, beaten up and intimidated and their houses blown up around them

(see separate story on page 14). “Without an SFOR tank parked in your front garden and a soldier on the roof, minorities would encounter even more violence,” Turk said in referring to incidents where NATO soldiers have been called in to protect vulnerable returnees.

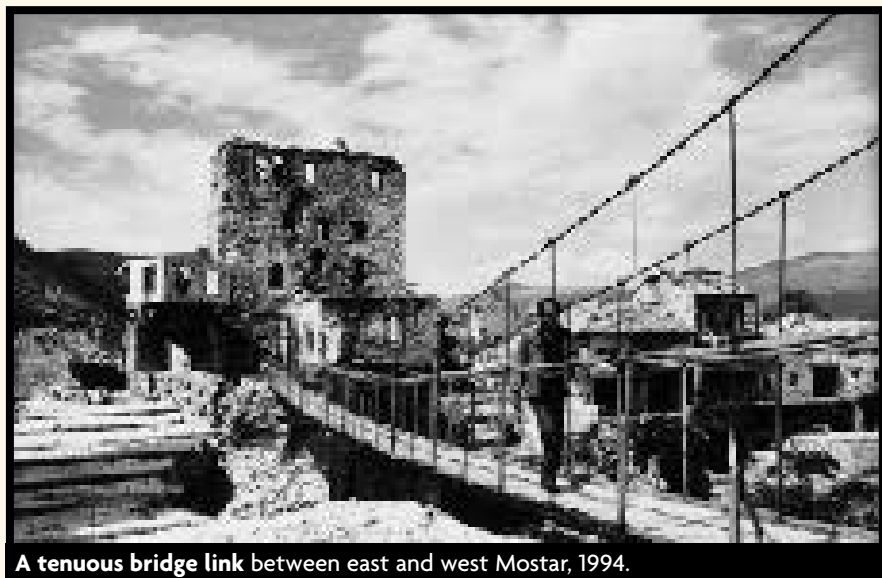
Recent visits to Bosniak, Croat and Serb

“Their weapon is generally no longer the gun, but red tape. Bureaucratic warfare is proving more effective than guerrilla warfare.”

communities within the Federation and Republika Srpska highlighted the day-to-day problems in helping minorities and the difficulties they face once they do go back.

Before the war Godinja was a pretty weekend mountain retreat for Sarajevans. It was wrecked during the fighting, but UNHCR and other agencies rehabilitated 22 homes at a cost of around \$8,000 each

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“Going home may be hazardous to your health”

Kirsten Young was a UNHCR protection officer during the worst days of the siege of the Bosnian town of Mostar. She recently revisited the area to see how it has adapted to peace. Her report:

Mostar, August, 1993: the stench of rotting corpses, the smell of excrement and garbage pervade the eastern part of town.

Ethnic cleansing is in full swing. Masked Croatian paramilitaries drag Muslims and Serbs from their beds in the dead of night. Men are taken to detention camps at Dretelj and Gabela, some never to be seen again.

Women are expelled from the Croat-held western bank across the river Neretva to the Muslim-held eastern quarter, often after being gang raped.

Some are killed, but the survivors cower in candle-lit basements from day and night mortar bombardments, wishing only to escape to safety; Germany, France, anywhere.

Memories are like a blurred fast moving film featuring columns of refugees, detention camps, wrecked hospitals, razed churches, toppled minarets and public parks converted into cemeteries.

Mostar, it seemed to us foreign workers at the time, was the center of the universe, our only purpose being to help the civilian victims of a brutal and senseless war but

failing to come to terms with the fact that genocide was again on the loose in Europe.

Returning to Mostar rekindled the spine-chilling fear of that time under siege when the airport was in no-man’s land and the only way ‘in’ was through a hail of rocket and sniper fire across the frontline.

A DIFFERENT SCENE

Today, the mines, the trip-wires, the checkpoints, the raggedly-dressed kids begging for food have all gone. Sniper warnings along the main street have been covered by election billboards, bomb craters have been filled in, shattered buildings rebuilt. There is a Benetton store, dog walkers, water and electricity.

Bridges have been repaired and freedom of movement restored, but this ‘normalcy’ is deceptive.

People who were forcibly evicted in those dark days still cannot go back home – despite Dayton, despite local pledges of reconciliation and despite the presence of NATO troops.

Why, I wondered in a city seemingly so ‘normal’ did people not simply insist on their right to return to old homes only

five minutes walk away on the other side of the river?

But the Mostar dilemma is the same as that facing communities throughout Bosnia. The old-style politicians and the gangs of thugs are still there. New hard-liners, themselves displaced, are in town occupying the empty homes of the ethnically cleansed. They will not move from Mostar unless they can return to their own homes elsewhere in Bosnia.

In such circumstances, going home may be hazardous to your health.

One group of Muslims I talked with returned to their village south of Mostar a month earlier. They were greeted on their first night back by a grenade tossed through a window which killed one man and wounded a second.

For the moment the villagers are shrugging off physical attacks and other forms of intimidation. There is no electricity or water and their homes have been looted to empty shells. It is peacetime but the windows of their homes are newly covered with UNHCR plastic sheeting – for me the symbol of war from those earlier days and not the sign of a hopeful future.

BEGGING FOR THEIR LIVES

In the final scene from the movie *Schindler’s List*, the hero says, “I should have taken more” referring to the number of Jews he tried to save. I felt enormous guilt in leaving Mostar that I had not been able to help in getting more people out of there too.

Every day people begged us, often on their knees, to help them leave before they were ‘next.’ We did what we could, but it was never enough. We would return a few days later to find some of the people we had talked to just a few days ago gone – disappeared, ethnically cleansed, massacred.

I hoped a return to Mostar might help me confront the demons of guilt which have haunted me for five years.

And then I met one man we did save – a detainee from the Gabela detention camp who was resettled in Europe.

He had returned to Bosnia several months earlier but the reality is that he is now a ‘minority’ returnee in his own town. His house is still half-destroyed, his neighbors are hostile but he says he is happier than at any time during those ‘safe’ years in Europe.

Why? Because he is home. My hope is that all of the people of Mostar will eventually be able to go home too. ■

► (throughout Bosnia, UNHCR has helped restore an estimated 30,000 family units) to try to kickstart returns to the region.

Serifa Lindov, her husband, son and daughter-in-law together with five other Bosniak families returned to the village located precariously near the so-called Zone of Separation (ZOS) which marks the Serb and Federation entities, but other houses remain empty or are used only as weekend homes. "The school and clinic used to be next door but now the nearest are two hours walk away," says Serifa in explaining why more of her neighbors had not come back.

The homes were rebuilt months ago but the local Serb municipality only recently reconnected the electricity. A sawmill and several other factories were burned down several years ago and have not been rehabilitated and so there are no jobs. Serifa's family survives on food handouts from relatives.

There is no public transport and the Muslims must walk through heavy winter snows to reach the now exclusively Serb town of Trnovo and then the outside world. Between Godinja and Trnovo is the destroyed Muslim village of Turovi. For nearly two years UNHCR has been involved in tortuous negotiations with Trnovo's Serb mayor to promote minority returns to Turovi. In exchange for rebuilding 20 Muslim houses, UNHCR offered to rehabilitate 20 Serb houses, a school and the sawmill.

MOVING THE GOAL-POSTS

But the goal-posts kept being moved, first over which houses should be rebuilt first, then over the numbers of people involved. Bosniak refugees from Turovi later intervened with their own objections. When it became clear it would be too expensive to try to rebuild their former homes, UNHCR offered to construct cheaper prefabricated houses. The refugees refused. Today the sawmill remains closed. Turovi is a deserted shell. The talks continue.

When UNHCR launched its 'Open Cities' concept in March 1997, the project met with widespread international acclaim. The idea was simple; towns and municipalities which promoted minority return and reconciliation would be rewarded with international assistance. Thus far, however, only 15,000 minorities have gone home under the program.

The municipality of Vogosca on the



Walking aids for war victims produced in Sarajevo by Islamic Relief Worldwide.

outskirts of Sarajevo was 'derecognized' late last year because of the authorities' slowness in implementing return programs. "The Case of the Homeless Cow" was symptomatic. When refugees want to return to their old homes, displaced persons currently living in that particular building must first be found alternate accommodation. In this particular case the person to be moved owned a cow but his proposed new location did not have room for an animal. He refused to move, the ministry did not insist and avoided discussing the situation with UNHCR officials for one month. Yet another refugee transfer was put on hold.

Banja Luka today is the capital of Republika Srpska, but the town and surrounding areas underwent some of the worst ethnic cleansing of the war. The road corridor between the Serb stronghold and the Federation town of Sanski Most 50 miles (80 kms) to the west even now vividly illustrates the

horrors of the earlier conflict and the dilemmas in trying to reconstruct a multi-ethnic nation.

Before the shooting began there were an estimated 60,000 Bosniaks and Croats in Banja Luka. Today there are fewer than 1,000. Every mosque was deliberately blown up and levelled though the rest of the town escaped physical damage.

It is a different story en route to Sanski Most. A freezing, deep fog blankets the region for many days in the winter, reducing visibility to a few yards at times. Disemboweled vehicles, villages still destroyed and abandoned, fields laced with mines, a convoy of heavy British tanks all

appear out of the gloom and disappear just as quickly into the murk. For a visitor the overriding sense is one of illusion rather than reality.

Kozarac village looks like a snapshot from the worst bombing excesses of World War Two. Virtually every house has been destroyed. Wild vegetation threatens to over-

UNHCR has increased its emphasis on high visibility protection programs.

whelm the ruins of this ghost town. Before the conflict, 4,000 relatively wealthy Bosniaks lived there. To encourage return UNHCR and the Norwegian Refugee Council rehabilitated 53 homes. Thus far, five families have returned.

Among them are Besic and Zumra Osman. They were given 10 minutes to quit their homes by Serb soldiers in 1992 during the ethnic cleansing. When they clambered aboard a waiting bus the village was still a pleasant, tree-lined place where the Osmans and their parents were born and raised. Two weeks after they left, the village was deliberately levelled.

"I had to take pills when I saw what had happened to my home," the 65-year-old

Unless the process of minority return is accelerated this year "we will miss the boat." It is a race against time.

Zumra Besic said describing her return in December. "I was crying out of control. It was as if my entire life had been wiped out." The Osmans came back with a suitcase full of clothes, one pot and a cooking stove. They live in one room, sleep on the

floor of their old home, eat bread and cheese and an occasional potato. There is no water. Serb authorities asked for the equivalent of 25 dollars to reconnect the electricity. The couple do not have any money and instead use two oil lamps for illumination.

"When I first came back I lay awake at night listening and worrying," the elderly Bosniak woman said. "One house nearby was blown up. But I am not afraid anymore. If they come for me again and I get killed, I get killed." The returnees are comforted by the nearby presence of Czech soldiers of the international force and the fact that the 'border' with the Federation and thus 'safety' is only a few kilometers away. ▶

Helping the women of war

A series of small-scale projects try to make a difference

"In the war the kids were happy with what they had. They were delighted with hand-me-down clothes from the Red Cross," a young Bosnian woman said. "Now they want the latest shoes from Adidas and Nike." A second woman attending a recent meeting in a 'conflict resolution center' in downtown Sarajevo added "Our children have grown up too quickly and become old too fast. School is boring and meaningless. And we feel so helpless." A third woman added her point of view, "The war was straightforward. Peace has become very complicated."

The physical scars of Bosnia's war are slowly being repaired, but the psychological trauma suffered by all of the country's four million people – soldiers, refugees and the displaced, survivors of the Sarajevo siege, 'ordinary' villagers – runs much deeper. Experts believe it could take years, if ever, to repair the human damage from the conflict. Last year, UNHCR allocated \$3.6 million from funds primarily supplied by the United States, to help finance an estimated 220 projects for one particular group – women – to try to patch their lives back together again.

The projects, organized through local organizations and collectively known as the Bosnian Women's Initiative, are deliberately low key and small-scale, designed to make a direct impact on individual lives. Effectively they help women become more

independent and self-sufficient by training them in new skills, finding them work, helping them to overcome psychological scars and providing legal assistance.

The women at the Sarajevo conflict center, many of them displaced, were attending regular meetings organized by a local group called Corridor. They learned to design and knit yarn products and each meeting turned into an informal rap session where the women could discuss personal problems and their frustrations.

Across the city in Vogosca municipality, a young mother and her six-year-old son from the town of Srebrenica sought help from a lawyer at the Sun Side Pro Femina Center to qualify for state benefits. Her husband disappeared during the fall of Srebrenica and since returning from Germany recently she, her mother and son, have survived on a \$70 a month pension. "I cannot face the question my son keeps asking again and again

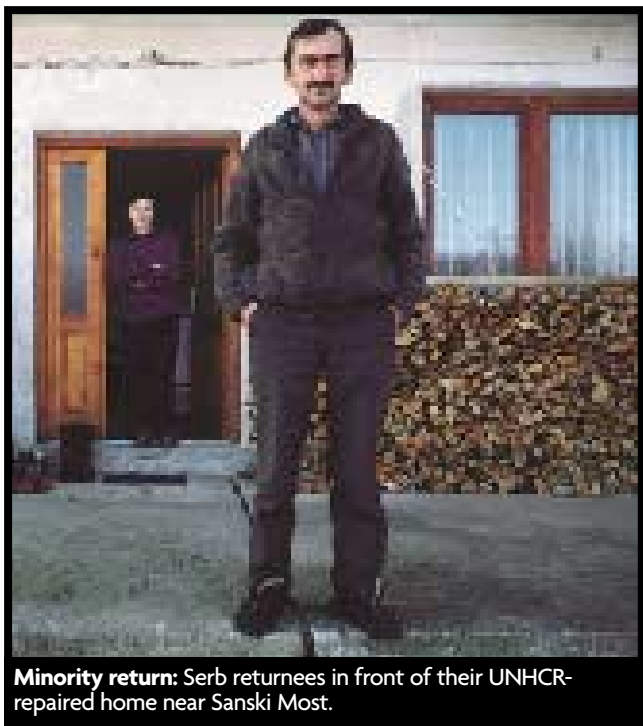
'Are we going to stay here this time or are we going to move again?'" the woman said. "I'm so tired. There is no solution."

At another meeting, a group of doctors, social workers and counsellors sit around a table with several patients in group therapy, including a single woman trying to raise a child on \$12 a month and a father and his daughter who had been raped. "We are trying to break the cycle of emotional numbing," explains one counsellor. The woman patient explains, "We have no self esteem left. And we have no money to replace that missing self esteem."

"The country is still in a mental limbo," says social worker Ragib Vacnaga. "The real problems are still to surface, especially in the young." For Bosnia, that is the real long term worry. ■

Women attend a course in home decoration in Sarajevo run by a local NGO Women for Women in Bosnia.





Minority return: Serb returnees in front of their UNHCR-repaired home near Sanski Most.

UNHCR / A. HOLLMANN

so badly. In an interview Petar Djodan, Deputy Minister for Refugees in the Bosnian Serb government posed that very question: “How can 50,000 Bosniaks return here at this time? Where will all the Serb refugees go? Where will they live?” But in a region where nothing is as straightforward as it may first appear on the surface, there is widespread suspicion that authorities deliberately keep some centers open just to be able to make that point and slow down returns.

were late in arriving, hindering the number of people going home. He added that unless the process is accelerated this year, “we will miss the boat” in helping large numbers of minorities return.

Meanwhile crime, black market activities, alcoholism and child prostitution are all on the rise in Sanski Most. Destitute refugees are increasingly being evicted from rented accommodation by wealthier returnees, mainly from Germany. “People arrive here with such hope, Bhandari said. “In Germany they have been told that everything has improved. But nothing has changed. People quickly fall into a pit of frustration.”

Bhandari, like other field officials, has noted other disturbing features of the minority return. The great majority of people who have already gone back are elderly, a trend some local authorities encourage on the assumption that the old are easier to manipulate and the minority population will eventually die out.

“The young will never come back here,” says Zumra Osman. “My two sons have new lives in the city.” Some families split up, sending one or two members to their old home while others stay in wartime accommodation. In that way families could continue to qualify for international aid, but by refusing to give up their ‘temporary’ accommodation they also block the return of minorities from the opposite direction. Others have become known as ‘day trippers’ visiting old homes during the day but returning to a ‘safe’ majority area at night. Some returnees even leave the lights turned on in the evenings to convince humanitarian officials they are living permanently in a new location. Wealthier refugees sim-

Across the ‘border’

Sanski Most has become an important center for the return process. An estimated 40,000 Bosniaks who formerly lived in what is now Republika Srpska have crowded into the once nondescript rural town, waiting for the moment to go home. Many returned from Germany, either voluntarily or as part of a process humanitarian officials euphemistically call ‘induced’ returns. Authorities on both sides of the line insist they are committed to allowing people to go home, but the process is agonizingly slow.

Bishnu Bhandari, a UNHCR official from Nepal who speaks Serbo-Croat fluently, said funds for some projects in 1998

▶ A few streets away from the Osmans, 150 Serbs who fled from what is now Federation territory live in one of the region’s so-called collective centers, in this case a former school. They have been there for three years and are among the war’s most poignant casualties – elderly, infirm and traumatized, often with few close relatives, no independent means of support and with little likelihood or desire to go back to their old homes.

Serb authorities use the plight of these homeless as a bargaining chip to ask international officials how they can welcome back Bosniak and Croat minorities when their own people continue to suffer

Bosnia’s Don Quixote

One defiant mayor with a dream tries to make a difference



Mile Marceta,
Mayor of Drvar.

An angry mob broke into Mile Marceta’s mayoral office several months ago, dragged him from the building and beat him to a pulp with wooden staves, ashtrays and bricks. He survived by lolling out his tongue and feigning death until Canadian

troops rode to the rescue and evacuated him to hospital. Within weeks Marceta was in a wheelchair and then on crutches, continuing a Quixote campaign which has earned him the hatred of hard-line nationalists and the admiration of some international officials – allowing the pre-war inhabitants of the west Bosnian town of Drvar to go home.

Marceta is an unlikely hero. A stout, greying middle-aged former salesman, he and thousands of fellow Serbs were driven from their childhood home in Drvar by Croatian and Muslim troops pressing the final offensive of the conflict in 1995. But in local elections permitting refugees to cast absentee ballots in their pre-war locations, Marceta was elected mayor of the town in 1997 and immediately began pursuing his dream.

Several thousand Serbs gingerly followed him back to Drvar in the most successful single return of refugees across ethnic lines anywhere in Bosnia. Though

UNHCR / A. HOLLMANN

ply buy residency permits in areas such as Sarajevo where they would now prefer to live.

Indeed, the country's entire social structure has been turned on its head since the war. Before the shooting began an estimated 61 percent of the population lived in rural areas. Today an equal number live in urban areas and there are indications that at least some of these people do not want to return to village life. One local study suggested as many as 35 percent of Bosnia's displaced would like to sell their old homes and move to a new location.

UNHCR reduced its operating budget from \$87 million in 1998 to \$64 million in 1999 and reorientated many of its projects. Funding for shelter projects such as house reconstruction was slashed by two-thirds from \$30 million to \$9 million, underlining the organization's decision to phase out emergency reconstruction programs which other agencies will now take over. Increased emphasis was placed on UNHCR 'core' projects such as high visibility protection programs including increased numbers of 'house calls' and monitoring patrols by protection officers in return areas and monitoring and strengthening court systems, the police and humanitarian institutions.

Senior program officer Kilian Kleinschmidt said UNHCR's 'inter-entity' bus line program which was designed to break down barriers between the various groups by offering free transport to and from different ethnic areas will also be reshaped. In future, the buses will carry people not only

"The young will never come back here."

they had comprised 97 percent of the town's population before the war, the region is now dominated by Croat nationalists determined to keep the region ethnically pure. Pursuing a similar cause in Republika Srpska, hard-line officials there were equally reluctant to dilute their own 'purity' by allowing fellow Serbs to leave.

Early last year, Croat nationalists decided enough was enough and launched an intimidation campaign – murdering two elderly Serb returnees in their beds, torching dozens of Serb owned houses and even turning their wrath on international officials, attacking several U.N.



Sarajevan women undergo typing training in 1998 at a local NGO, Be My Friend.

internally within Bosnia but, it is hoped, to and from neighboring Croatia and Yugoslavia. Since Dayton, the fleet has carried an estimated 800,000 people annually, a success story which Kleinschmidt termed "one of our most beautiful activities." He now hopes to replicate that on a regional basis.

Many field workers are convinced they are now in a race against time. Says Barry Rigby, head of UNHCR's Bosnia operations, "This may be a defining year. It may be our last chance" to make a major impact on minority return. Some European governments are already professing a preference for 'relocation'

rather than minority return whereby refugees would continue to be encouraged to go back to Bosnia and 'relocate' to majority ethnic areas rather than going to their old homes.

Such a plan has one obvious merit; it would be far simpler to implement than trying to help hundreds of thousands of people return to areas where the local authorities now in place don't want them and at times are willing to resort to violence to stop them. Critics argue the international community would then be complicit in supporting the basic aim of the war extremists in establishing ethnically cleansed mini-states. According to the respected International Crisis Group, Bosnia's peace is still "built on shifting sands" and in such a situation there are no easy answers. ■

buildings. It was during this period that Marceta was personally targeted.

Even some international officials consider Marceta too abrasive, too pushy, simply too obsessed with his personal dreams. He is unrepentant. He is highly critical of the outside world: "There is still no security here, no housing. I do not call it the Dayton Peace Agreement. I call it the Dayton Trap." But he recognizes that he still needs all the help he can get: "We want assistance. We want a cow from you, a chicken, a small fishpond. To help us restart our lives."

The problem of minority returns remains the single most intractable problem in postwar Bosnia. Marceta recognizes the deep divisions which persist: "Whenever I cross the inter-entity boundary line (the artificial border between Republika Srpska and the Bosniak-Croat Federation) I am not a human any more in the eyes of the Croats. When I go back to Drvar I return to the stone age."

He adds, "I will fight as long as I can breathe. We Serbs will never flee again." Marceta is one of only a few individuals in Bosnia who have tried, and have been successful, in making a little difference. ■

BALKAN EVENTS

■ UNHCR assisted as many as 3.5 million people at the height of the conflict in the former Yugoslavia.

■ As many as 250,000 people were reportedly killed in Bosnia alone during the fighting, and the term ethnic cleansing entered everyday language.

GERMANY

CROATIA



1 When Croatia and Slovenia proclaimed independence from the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia in June, 1991, war followed immediately. The Croatian city of Vukovar was the scene of some of the earliest and most bitter fighting. During several months of Serb bombardment, the town on the Danube River was flattened and the term 'ethnic cleansing' entered the vocabulary of war.

CROATIA



2 Bosnia-Herzegovina declared independence in March 1992 and when conflict spread to that region, hundreds of thousands of people were uprooted from their homes. The first tented camp for refugees in Europe since the end of World War Two was established on a football field in the Croatian coastal town of Rijeka and catered to Bosnian children.

SWITZERLAND

ITALY

SLOVENIA

LJUBLJANA

ZAGREB

BOSNIA



10 The rehabilitation of homes, industry and basic infrastructure is a key to the future stability of Bosnia. Three years after Dayton, however, many parts of the country remain devastated, including the town of Kozarac in the Prijedor area of Republika Srpska. A few Bosnian families have moved back to the region, but reconstruction and return have been very slow.

2

CROATIA

5

BOSNIA AND HERZEGOVINA

10

7

6

3

8

SARAJEVO

1

MONTE

KOSOVO



9 Though conflict had ended in other areas of the former Yugoslavia, fighting between government soldiers and police and the Kosovo Liberation Army took place throughout much of 1998. Several hundred thousand people were displaced and others were killed. An international verification force was posted to the region, but there was renewed turmoil in early 1999 and in one infamous incident the bodies of several dozen murdered villagers were discovered in the town of Racak.

ROME

TIRANA

MOSTAR



8 Another key feature of Dayton was the provision for elections. General and municipal elections have been held in the interim, these ones in the Bosnian city of Mostar. More are planned.

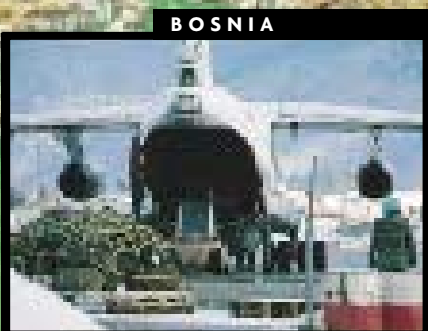
The boundaries and designations shown on this map do not imply official endorsement or acceptance by the United Nations.

■ The Sarajevo airlift ran from July, 1992 until January, 1996, and was of even longer duration than the Berlin Airlift. The air-bridge fed the city for three winters.

■ There are still 1.2 million refugees and displaced persons waiting to return to their homes in Bosnia at the start of 1999.

■ A \$5.1 billion dollar reconstruction package has helped rebuild parts of Bosnia since the Dayton Peace Agreement, but huge areas still need assistance.

HUNGARY



UNHCR / A. HOLLMANN

3 The Bosnian capital of Sarajevo was besieged and in July, 1992, UNHCR began a humanitarian airlift to feed the city. The air-bridge became the longest-running humanitarian operation of its kind in history and helped sustain the city through three winters. The airlift closed in January, 1996.

GENEVA



UNHCR / A. HOLLMANN

4 There were constant diplomatic meetings to try to halt the conflict in the former Yugoslavia. In late 1993, High Commissioner Sadako Ogata met with Bosnian leaders in Geneva to try to halt the carnage and ensure ongoing assistance to as many as 3.5 million people.

UKRAINE

MOLDOVA

CHISINAU ●

● BELGRADE

FEDERAL REPUBLIC OF YUGOSLAVIA

ROMANIA

● BUCHAREST

9

● PRISTINA

NEGRO

KOSOVO

● SOFIA

BULGARIA

● SKOPJE

FYR OF MACEDONIA

BOSNIA



BOB TURNER

5 Croatian troops launched Operation Storm in August, 1995, to retake the Krajina area of the country from rebel Serbs. Nearly 200,000 Serbs fled the region. Many trekked through Serb-controlled areas of Bosnia during their exodus en route to Serbia.

DAYTON



S. GW. PATTERSON / AFP / GETTY

7 After intense negotiations, the Dayton Peace Agreement was initiated at a U.S. air force base at Dayton by all the involved parties. The agreement ended hostilities and paved the way for the return of refugees and displaced persons to Bosnia. One month later, a NATO-led implementation force deployed to the region. The Dayton accord remains the cornerstone of rebuilding and reconstruction efforts today.

ALBANIA

GREECE

● ATHENS

TUZLA



UNHCR / E. DAGNINO

6 The Bosnian enclave of Srebrenica became an officially protected U.N. safe area but it eventually fell to Serb forces in July 1995.

Thousands of people, mainly women, children and the elderly were expelled to areas like Tuzla, but several thousand other mainly younger males were massacred in the worst single atrocity in Europe since World War Two.

TURKEY



“For the first time in my life, people risked their lives for me.”

UNHCR field representative Vincent Cochetel after being kidnapped and held for 317 days in Chechnya and then freed by Russian special forces.

“We were forced to lie down in the snow with our hands behind our heads and we were beaten. We were then ordered up a hillside and when we panicked and started running the police opened fire. Some were shot down, others were executed where they lay.”

A survivor of the Racak atrocity in Kosovo.



“In Bosnia all of them were doing so...Serbs, Croats, anybody. Ethnic cleansing was their specialty.”

Yugoslav President Slobodan Milosevic, responding to charges

he assisted in Bosnia’s ethnic cleansing on behalf of the Bosnian Serbs.



“A lasting peace within Bosnia and Herzegovina is starting to take root. But there is still much work to be done.”

A statement by the multi-national Peace Implementation Council monitoring events in Bosnia.



“Our main donor, our main supporter, with a proud history of refugee involve-

ment, has in place some of the most severe restrictions in its history.”

Dennis McNamara, director of international protection at UNHCR, commenting on asylum procedures in the United States.



“For all intents and purposes, the Angolan peace process has collapsed and the country is now in a state of war.”

U.N. Secretary-General Kofi Annan blaming both sides for renewed conflict in Angola.



“After the fifth stroke of the machete on my hand I fainted. I only woke up after I heard my little daughter screaming. They were also chopping off her hand.”

A woman from Sierra Leone describing one of the many daily atrocities being committed in that West African country by rebels.



“We should stop looking for scapegoats and look inwards to resolve our problems... The illusion that...salvation will come from outside the continent should also stop.”

Salim Ahmed Salim, Secretary General of the Organization of African Unity, at a pan-African conference on refugees.



IT'S A MINEFIELD...

The country is scarred by hidden explosives...and political pitfalls

As some of the worst fighting of the war raged near Sarajevo's international airport in 1992, Bego Memisevic laced the area around his suburban home with mines. Serb attackers eventually overran the district and Bego did not return for four years. Poking through the devastation of his former residence he stepped on an explosive and blew away his right leg. "It was a mine I had planted myself," he says today with almost a wry smile. "I guess I forgot where I had put it."

Mines killed and maimed thousands of soldiers and civilians alike during the war and they remain a major deterrent today to efforts to resettle the homeless and kick start the country's anemic economy.

One million explosives may still be buried in an estimated 30,000 minefields across Bosnia. Most of them mark the former frontlines and according to Tim Horner, technical adviser to UNHCR for mine action, an ambitious database has pinpointed perhaps 60 percent of the hidden ordnance.

"But it's anyone's guess where the other mines are," says Horner, a former British Royal Navy specialist and one of only a few dozen experienced mine experts to be found anywhere in the world. Sarajevo alone has as many as 1,400 mined areas even in the busiest section of the city. As trams and taxis rattle by on one of Sarajevo's main thoroughfares, the former Sniper's Alley, experts still diligently clear the grounds of the former downtown Tito Military Barracks.

Mines continue to claim as many as 10 victims each month, but this figure is down from 100 a month just a couple of years ago. Horner believes "we should be able to get on top of the problem within five years" by clearing the most important areas, but other experts talk about 'two generations' for a more extensive operation.

As part of its efforts to promote the return of refugees and displaced persons, UNHCR allocated \$2.5 million in 1999 to

help finance six mine clearance teams of around 40 people each as part of an international effort coordinated by the Mine Action Centre (MAC). Eventually, it is hoped that local groups and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) will take over these functions.

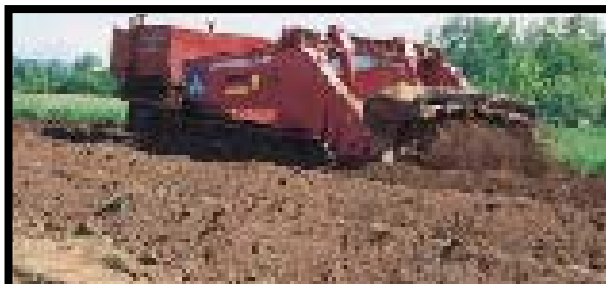
Mine clearing, Bosnia style, can be deadly dull, deadly slow and simply deadly. In 1997, experts painstakingly cleared a total of 6.8 sq kms (2.6 sq miles) of what officials call the 'silent menace' but even then at a high cost. Eleven mine clearers were killed that year. In October, 1998, two UNHCR mine clearers were killed in the Jajce area of the country. Experts say the work is so slow and deliberate clearers find it difficult to maintain concentration. One slip, for just one second, could cost a life.

There are many political pitfalls along the way, too. Municipal officials deliberately mislead international workers trying to promote the return of 'minorities' by claiming villages and regions are heavily mined and not suitable for settlement. Later investigations often prove the areas are 'clean' but at the very least return has been slowed down again. NATO troops in Bosnia have sophisticated mine clearing units, but though local commanders have been keen to help the civilian effort, sensitivities over just what troops can and cannot do have stymied any large scale assistance.



Bego Memisevic, who returned to his Sarajevo home after the war and was disabled by a mine he had planted there and forgotten about earlier in the conflict.

UNHCR / A. HOLLMANN



A German "mine breaker" churns through a suspected minefield at Sarajevo airport.

UNHCR / C. SHIRLEY

In Sarajevo, Bego Memisevic's life is full of tragic irony. He blew himself up with his own mine just a few months after leaving the Bosnian army. If he had been a soldier at the time of the accident he would have received the equivalent of 300 Deutschmarks a month as a pension. As a civilian he gets just 38. He has to spend two-thirds of this, his only source of income, to dress his artificial leg each month.

Still, he considers himself a 'lucky' victim. He rebuilt part of his house with UNHCR assistance and lives there today with his wife and son. "What happened to me is God's will," he says. "But at least I am still alive." ■

“THEY CAME BACK TO A BIZARRE AND SURREAL WORLD...”

After a slow beginning, the number of refugees returning to Croatia is expected to increase this year

The first indications of war were small telltale signs. Vera Kruljac remembers her Serb neighbors stopped socializing and wishing her good morning en route to work. Then the Serbs sent their children away. All too soon, artillery and mortar shells began raining down on their neighborhood. Vera Kruljac and her two sons were lucky. Helped by the Red Cross, they fled their home and reached the Croatian coast. Ivica Kruljac, her husband, was taken prisoner by advancing Serb forces and even today will only talk reluctantly about what happened next.

Vera and Ivica Kruljac were both born and raised in Vukovar, the major town sitting on the rich alluvial plains of the Danube River. The region is no stranger to war and down the centuries armies and empires, Hungarian, German, Austrian and Ottoman, fought for control of the strategic area.

When Croatia declared independence from Federal Yugoslavia in 1991 and war ensued, Vukovar became one of the first targets of the Serb-dominated Yugoslav People's Army. In three months of round-the-clock shelling, the city was literally flattened. The bulk of its 40,000 majority Croat population cowered in cellars for weeks. Some were killed. Many were wounded. Most of the survivors were subsequently forced to leave at gunpoint. The term ethnic cleansing became firmly anchored in the vocabulary of war.

“At first I was forced to replace tiles on the roofs of buildings at the height of the shelling,” Ivica Kruljac said, recalling his days as a prisoner. “Then I collected dead bodies from the streets.” He was locked in a cellar at night and repeatedly beaten. “Some people were taken outside, tortured and killed. We could hear screams and the shots,” he said. Prisoners who were detailed to get rid of the ‘evidence’ were themselves then ‘eliminated’ according to Kruljac.

A SURREAL WORLD

The Croat eventually joined his wife and family. They returned to Vukovar in June, 1998, and entered a bizarre and surreal world which many displaced persons, not only in Croatia, but throughout the former Yugoslavia have faced since the end of hostilities.

Most of the houses abandoned by fleeing Croats which survived the bombardment were subsequently occupied by Serbs, many of them also victims of war from Bosnia and other parts of Croatia where

turned, unless they had somewhere else to go,” Vera Kruljac said. She remembers U.N. observers in the region visiting regularly “to see that the Serbs were okay and not being victimized. They never asked about us.”

The term ethnic cleansing became firmly anchored in the vocabulary of war.



Returnee Vera Kruljac at work in her kitchen in Vukovar.

UNHCR / A. HOLLMANN

they were not welcome. The Kruljacs discovered their home had been occupied by a local Serb family from Vukovar who refused to move out. The Kruljacs eventually established a ‘bridgehead’ moving into one bedroom of their own home, along with the Serbs. “There was an agreement that people could not simply be thrown out of a property, even when an owner re-

Vera Kruljac began to “expand my empire, from the bedroom into the kitchen where I cooked and took up residency on the kitchen stool.” The Serbs were eventually evicted on a technicality because they had not officially registered as displaced persons, but the Kruljacs suffered one final indignity. On the day their ‘visitors’ left, the Serbs took most of the house’s furniture with them. The Kruljacs stood and watched from the garden but refused to try to stop their neighbors looting for fear the eviction itself might be halted.

“It was almost funny,” Ivica Kruljac says now. “We got our house back but this Serb could have had me shot during the early days of the war. We were lucky.”

Many people have been far less fortunate. Nearly 80,000 refugees and internally displaced went home since 1995, including some 35,000 who returned from Bosnia and Yugoslavia. But there are still an estimated 40,000 refugees in Bosnia and 300,000 in Yugoslavia. Many of those mostly Croatian Serbs had been ruthlessly driven from Croatia’s Krajina region during the army’s 1995 blitzkrieg known as Operation Storm and until now have been blocked by Zagreb from going home in any significant numbers.

Vukovar itself, despite widespread international attention, is still on a life support system. Only 1,600 of the city's former Croat population has returned. Serb residents fearing reprisals from hard-line Croats, have continued to desert the region. A few buildings have been symbolically restored, but Vukovar remains a monument to the folly of war. Factories, homes and shops remain gutted. Unemployment stands at around 90 percent. Traffic signals have been re-connected, but they almost mock the empty streets and buildings.

Throughout the entire Danube or East Slavonia region which returned to full Croatian sovereignty in 1998 following a period under United Nations administration, less than half the pre-war population has returned.

As in neighboring Bosnia, 1999 may become a decisive year in efforts to resettle Croatia's refugees and internally displaced. Under intense international pressure to end years of deliberate foot-dragging and speed up refugee return, Zagreb in June 1998 approved a National Return Program which, in principle at least, should make it easier for everyone, whatever their ethnicity, to return to Croatia with a minimum of formalities. This move was reinforced when the government also rescinded two harsh pieces of wartime legislation which made it difficult, and at times impossible, for returnees to reclaim their old properties.

COMING HOME

In the half year since the plan was adopted returns have picked up only slightly, though UNHCR protection officer Arvind Gupta said he anticipated the flow will increase in spring. But daunting problems face the returnees. Croatian politics are in a state of flux and a forthcoming general election will only add to a mood of national uncertainty. Many senior officials simply do not want the Serbs to return and those who have gone home thus far are mainly elderly people with no real future ahead of them.

Economic conditions in Croatia are better than in Yugoslavia, but not by much, and younger Serbs remain fearful of returning because of perceived ongoing discrimination, not only politically but also



A reconstruction project in Vukovar funded by the European Union.

in such areas as jobs and schooling. The government allocated the equivalent of nearly \$2.5 billion for reconstruction in the next five years, but some estimates suggest \$25 billion is a more realistic figure for what is needed.

International donors are wary of pumping large amounts of aid into Croatia given what they feel is the government's disappointing record in promoting meaningful return. A December 1998 international conference on reconstruction and development in Zagreb, for instance, was only partially successful; it was useful in promoting a greater awareness of Croatia's needs but generated little of the assistance the government was looking for.

"We expect to see a surge of returnees in the spring."

"Our nightmare scenario is that large numbers of people will come home, but then they will decide to go back to Yugoslavia because there are still too many problems here," one UNHCR field officer said.

During an era of reduced spending in most regions, UNHCR maintained its 1999 budget in Croatia at \$13 million, the same as the previous year. Program officer Iain Hall said in the coming months UNHCR programs would focus on "following the returnees home and helping them on the spot in such areas as minor home repairs. We will reduce the amount given to each individual,

but we will also try to help more people." The overall strategy will be a community based approach with the aim of rapid reintegration.

But whatever happens, it will be a difficult end of the millennium in Croatia. In a best case scenario, officials estimate 30,000 people will return this year. Even if that target is met, it will still mean that less than 10 percent of the country's refugee population will go home in 1999. ■



A UNHCR repatriation officer in Osijek discusses the problems a Serb refugee woman faces in returning to her pre-war home.

EUROPE'S 'FORGOTTEN' REFUGEES

Ironically, the Kosovo conflict has highlighted the largely ignored plight of 550,000 refugees

by Paula Ghedini

They number more than half a million exiles, and as a group form the largest concentration of refugees in Europe. Thousands of people live in converted schoolrooms, barracks or former factories. Entire families have squeezed into tiny single-room accommodation, many for as long as seven years. Some people, having escaped war once in their own country, find themselves entrapped by renewed conflict in their adopted homes. Thus far, only a few thousand people have managed to go home and for the first time many are beginning to accept they may never return.

The plight of these refugees living in the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia has remained largely ignored by the outside world for years, but ironically, as the conflict in the country's Kosovo province exploded onto the world's television screens in 1998 and this year, the future of these

forgotten people has come into sharper focus.

When the old Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia crumbled in 1991 and fighting erupted first in Croatia and the next year in Bosnia-Herzegovina, hundreds of thousands of civilians fled in every direction, many ethnic Serbs to the rump Yugoslav state comprising the Republics of Serbia and Montenegro. In 1995, 170,000 local Serbs abandoned the Krajina region of Croatia following a government onslaught called Operation Storm and trekked on foot, by car, horse-drawn carts and tractors toward Belgrade.

By this time, Yugoslavia was playing host not only to the largest number of refugees in Europe, but also one of the largest in the world. But because President Slobodan Milosevic was widely perceived to be the main instigator of the Balkan conflict, the international community was less generous with its aid programs to Yugoslavia than to other areas such as Bosnia. The situation deteriorated further when fighting in Kosovo began and renewed economic sanctions were slapped on Belgrade for its role in that situation. And although all governments in the region paid lip service to helping all refugees go home, in reality large-scale repatriation has been effectively blocked.

NOWHERE TO TURN

Those developments left the bulk of Yugoslavia's 550,000 refugees in a state of limbo, uncertain whether they would ever be allowed to go home and if not, whether they could rebuild their lives here or seek a new future in a third country.

UNHCR since 1991 has provided \$250 million in assistance, first as emergency help for newly arriving refugees and then for a series of programs designed to help them whatever final decision they made on their future.

The most disappointing and frustrating problem remains the right of return.



Last year, the organization helped more than 510,000 people directly or through cooperating agencies. UNHCR allocated \$8 million in 1998-99 for income generating projects, to help refugees remaining in Yugoslavia to establish small businesses by opening beauty salons, restaurants, beekeeping and agricultural cooperatives. During 1999 it will continue a program to build or finance 480 housing units for around 2,500 refugees. Two-thirds of these units

are self-help projects in which UNHCR and local municipalities provide the materials and technical support and refugees themselves build their own homes, fostering both self reliance and community spirit.

For the 40,000 people still living in 544 collective centers throughout the country, UNHCR has continued to provide not only traditional dry food items, but through

five consecutive winters such things as fresh fruits, vegetables, heating fuel and high protein food as well as implementing education, health and social projects and recreational activities for children.

But the future remains clouded by doubt for the great majority of refugees. Since Serbia introduced a new Citizenship Law in



Tens of thousands of Krajina Serbs trekked towards Serbia after being ousted from their homes during a Croatian army offensive in 1995.

© J. LEUNG/GALLIES



Krajina refugees at the Kragujevac collective center in Serbia.

UNHCR / A. KAZINIBRANKI

1997, 100,000 people have applied and 42,000 have been approved for citizenship and permanent residence. No one has been rejected thus far. Others would prefer to try to restart their lives in a new part of the world and last year more than 6,000 refugees were resettled under an official

UNHCR program, primarily in the United States, Canada, Australia and various European countries. A similar number are expected to move this year, though with applications running at around 400 per week especially from Kosovo, demand far outweighs the number of places available.

The most disappointing and frustrating problem, however, remains the right of return. Thus far only 3,000 refugees have gone back to Croatia and 1,000 to Bosnia. According to UNHCR and government estimates there could be a larger return in 1999 which officials not only in Yugoslavia, but also in Bosnia-Herzegovina and Croatia (see *separate stories*) see as a decisive make-or-break year in trying to engineer large-scale repatriation.

UNHCR had filed 14,000 return applications with the Croatian Office for Displaced Persons and Refugees (ODPR) by the end of 1998 and a further 8,000 applications in early 1999. This followed a joint country-wide voluntary repatriation information campaign jointly presented by UNHCR and the Serbian Commissioner for Refugees (SCR) which included briefings by UNHCR field officers from Croatia.

After one such meeting, members of the Karan family from the Krajina decided to put aside their deep fears and return to their ancestral home. "Of course we worry about security," the father said. "I just hope I can find a job once we return. But we know our house has not been destroyed and we need to go home." Most refugees in Yugoslavia probably have similar sentiments, but a big doubt hangs over whether they will be able to fulfill their dreams. ■

An open door

Montenegro may be a small republic, but it warmly welcomes refugees

When Croatian troops stormed through the Krajina region in 1995, Jovan and Milica Jojnovic, like most of their Serb neighbors, fled their home. "We thought we would be back in a few days," Jovan Jojnovic recalls, but instead they have spent the last 3 1/2 years as refugees in one small room at the Hotel Bor in the town of Gusinje in Montenegro. "Look at this room," Milica wept to one recent visitor. "We eat here, sleep here and everything we own is here. This is not a home. We must go back."

The elderly Jojnovics have now officially applied for permission to return to their village of Gracac after learning

their house was only minimally damaged and is still empty.

Montenegro, which together with Serbia comprises the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, is a tiny republic famed locally for its Adriatic beaches and mountain ski resorts. It covers 14,000 square kilometers with a mixed population of 635,000 Montenegrins, Serbs, Muslims and Albanians.

Remarkably, given its small size and population, Montenegro also hosts an estimated 85,000 refugees from Croatia and Bosnia and internally displaced people, mainly from nearby Kosovo — one of the highest percentage concentrations of exiles compared with local citizens anywhere in the world.

Some, like the Jojnovics have spent years in the republic which not only allowed unimpeded entry of refugees and Kosovars, but more remarkably, opened its hotels, hospitals and other accommodation to the new arrivals. Others spend a matter of days — depending on the ebb and flow of the conflict in Kosovo — before returning home.

Events in Kosovo will probably continue to dominate humanitarian actions in Montenegro. UNHCR has maintained a permanent presence and has been providing assistance to refugees in the republic since 1991, with offices in Podgorica, the capital, and others in the towns of Ulcinj and Rozaje, but it was not until Kosovars fleeing the fighting there began to arrive in large numbers that the international community became interested in the region. Today around 22 international humanitarian organizations are working in the republic.

Longtime refugees feel perplexed and angry with this situation. Vladimir is a refugee who says he hardly saw an aid worker until people fleeing the fighting in Kosovo arrived and now he cannot keep track of everyone visiting his hotel. But if all the Kosovars go home from Montenegro — and 12,000 people did in one recent lull in the conflict — he wonders, "Will the world forget about us again?" ■



Civilians flee the village of Racak in early 1999.

KOSOVO DIARY

Fernando del Mundo arrived in Kosovo for UNHCR shortly after Yugoslav President Slobodan Milosevic agreed to allow humanitarian agencies free access to the region's war-affected people. Following are highlights from his diary about what happened next:

August 16: Attempted to deliver emergency supplies to 100 displaced people in Decane but by the time we arrive they had vanished. Returning to Pristina, we see groups of 100-200 people along the Vistrica River and local aid workers say there are 10,000 homeless in the area. It is still summertime and fruits and vegetables are plentiful but the signs of war are everywhere: rotting crops, the carcasses of machine-gunned livestock, clusters of ruined stone houses.

August 18: A Kosovo Liberation Army commander accuses UNHCR staff of being spies as we try to deliver aid to 20,000 people in central Kosovo. A local doctor is treating 100 people per day, 90 percent of them children stricken with diarrhea. Their distended bellies remind me of Africa's malnourished children.

August 25: Three Mother Teresa Society workers are killed when seven tractor trailers loaded with UNHCR emergency supplies are blasted by artillery rounds. Passing by Pagarusa, a 34-year-old

mother tells me the child she is carrying was born in the woods five weeks earlier. She is still looking for her two other children who were separated from her when her village was shelled.

August 29: Two colleagues and I visit Senik which was hit the day before. Houses still smoulder. Tractor trailers filled with food and personal possessions are ablaze. At least 17 people were killed in the attack. The villagers ask us to stay on to deter snipers as they bury their dead in the rain. Among the victims is a two-week old baby who died of starvation because her wounded mother could not feed her.

September 1: Orahovac was abandoned in July, but the government says 30,000 people have returned from the woods and things appear normal with shops open. It is the first sign that people, though still scared, are going back.

September 4: There were 5,000 people on a hill above Sedlare 24 hours ago, but today the place is empty. It is like this throughout the summer – people moving in and out of villages, from one place to another. It is difficult to even keep track of this constant swirl of people.

September 9: Thousands of people have fled to the Pec region. A colleague and I try to estimate numbers packed into cars, carts and tractor trailers bumper-to-bumper but we give up after walking three kilometers. Shell fire is getting nearer and an old man begs, "Please, could you do something to stop the shelling." As we leave soldiers and tanks are gathering a few kilometers away. When we return the next day, all the people have gone.

September 11: Houses in the town of Barane are burning. Police emerge from some homes as we drive by. One carries a television set. Further on, the villages of Celopek and Kostradic have been damaged by the fighting and are empty.

September 19: After three previous attempts we reach villages north of Pristina which have been engulfed by a four-day government offensive. Ten thousand people have fled. In Dobratin, 30 of 70 houses have been torched. The villagers are stoic. The next day they are very agitated; they have just found the charred remains of three people burned in an outhouse.

September 21: KLA soldiers have been helping old men, women and children from Kacanol mountain village northwest of Pristina. One 70-year-old man wandered the woods for five days looking for his family of eight. Another is on the verge of tears; a six month supply of wheat he bought with money sent by a brother in Germany has been burned by soldiers.

September 25: A military offensive is at its height. Houses are on fire in villages in central Kosovo. We pass a convoy of government trucks with signs pasted on them 'Social Humanitarian Aid of Kosovo and Metohija.' The wind whips up the tarpaulin on one truck, revealing blue uniformed police crammed inside.

September 26: High Commissioner Sadako Ogata visits Resnik 25 kilometers north of Pristina and talks with some of the 25,000 people who fled a military sweep in the region. As Ogata sloshes by in the mud, one portly old man in a woollen skullcap mutters: "It is a shame for Milosevic to put his people in a situation like this."

September 30: Three Red Cross workers lie dead or dying on a sunlit hill at Gornje Obrinje after their car hit a landmine. People try to attract a Yugoslav helicopter by waving Red Cross flags. My colleague, John Campbell, a veteran British soldier, turns on his vehicle's headlights to attract the chopper. It is too late for one wounded doctor who died moments before.



Kosovo civilians camped out in the open near Kisna Reka in late 1998.

UNHCR / R. LEMOYNE

October 27: Serbian troops pull back from positions in Kosovo following a peace agreement that 2,000 verifiers of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe will oversee. The atmosphere is like Liberation Day. People return to their homes for the first time in months. Relatives embrace each other weeping. At Malisevo, the purported capital of a liberated Kosovo, a guerrilla commander talks to reporters as government troops withdraw from a garrison just a kilometer away.

November 3: As snow begins to cover the mountain tops, the last of an estimated 50,000 most vulnerable people encamped in the hills, go back to their villages. But many find their houses destroyed. There are still 200,000 people displaced in Kosovo.

November 9: The war is never far away. Several hundred returnees at Opterusa in the Suva Reka municipality flee again. Five KLA guerrillas are killed in a nearby ambush three days later.

November 19: Velika Hoca is a mainly Serb village and local Serbs flash the thumb and two finger sign of defiance. Over coffee and local brandy a couple say Albanian villagers have fired on them but there have been no major confrontations. The housewife says her village has been

spared thus far because there are 13 churches here and God has protected them from the bloodletting.

December 4: All but two houses in the village of Lodja have been destroyed by war-planes, artillery and mortar fire. The mayhem is reminiscent of Warsaw during World War Two. A sign in Serbian is scrawled on a wall at the entrance to the village that roughly translates 'Lodja does not exist anymore.'

December 14: Despite the October cease-fire, the spiral of violence ratchets up. Masked men spray gunfire at the Panda Cafe in Pec, killing six Serbian teenagers playing pool. Along the frontier, soldiers kill 34 armed Albanian intruders.

January 16: Forty-five people are massacred in the village of Racak in Stimlje during a Serb sweep. The strikes are triggered by KLA assaults

on policemen and the kidnapping of eight soldiers and five Serb civilians. More than 30,000 ethnic Albanians are again on the move. There is no sign of a political breakthrough and there are again threats of NATO airstrikes.

January 21: Despite the renewed fighting, some areas are stable. Malisevo was emptied in July and its 3,000 residents were afraid to go back because of a heavy police presence. Following the deployment of the international monitors, however, more than half the people did return, including Ramadan Mazreky. He considers himself lucky because none of his extended family of 45, including 25 children, were harmed in the fighting.

January 28: Travelling along dirt tracks in the snow covered valley at Velika Reka we can hear the rattle of gunfire and occasional mortar blast as government forces pursue another offensive. A KLA commander sweeps by and says, "we are not giving up one inch of our positions." At the nearby village of Bradas a group of men say that 20 percent of the people from each village in Kosovo have already fled abroad. More are thinking of getting out. "How many more people must die before NATO acts?" demands one old man. ■

■ U.S. President Bill Clinton has authorized spending an additional \$25 million to aid refugees from the conflict in Kosovo.

■ Nearly two million people have been killed in Sudan's 15-year civil war according to the U.S. Committee for Refugees.

Seeking asylum

KAZAKHSTAN

Signing on

Kazakhstan has acceded to the 1951 Refugee Convention and its 1967 Protocol, the fourth country in Central Asia to do so, following Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan and Turkmenistan. After the collapse of the Soviet Union and Kazakhstan's independence in 1991, hundreds of thousands of people crisscrossed the country, fleeing political and ecological disasters. There are currently around 14,000 refugees and asylum seekers in the country.

ETHIOPIA

Somalis flee to the Ogaden

Several thousand Somalis crossed into the Ogaden region of Ethiopia late last year. It was the first large-scale exodus of Somalis into Ethiopia since civil war and famine in 1993-94, but Ethiopian officials stressed the new arrivals were escaping the effects of drought and not ongoing clan-based warfare in their home region.

UNITED STATES

Help on the way

Nearly two million people, some of them former refugees, are waiting to become American citizens. Now, Washington said it wants to speed up the naturalization process. The Immigration and Naturalization Service said it will hire 300 more employees and create a national hot line to help prospective citizens. President Clinton said in his State of the Union address in January that his budget proposals would "expand significantly" efforts to chip away at the backlog of people waiting to become citizens. Immigration officials said they expect the measures to cut in half the normal two-year waiting time.

ANGOLA

It's war again

Only a year ago the situation had seemed promising. The Angolan government and UNITA rebels had signed a peace accord in 1994, the U.N. had spent \$1.5 billion to help stabilize the country and it was beginning to scale down its presence. But the conflict began again and by early this year the conflict was so widespread U.N. Secretary-General Kofi Annan announced "The conditions for a meaningful United Nations peace keeping role (have) ceased to exist... the parties and their leaders must assume full and direct responsibility for the suffering of their people." UNHCR, which had nine field offices last summer trying to help hundreds of thousands of people, withdrew its staff to Luanda, the capital. Around one million people had been displaced by earlier fighting and an additional 550,000 fled their homes last



A United Nations food aircraft in Luanda. Two similar aircraft were shot down in late 1998 and early 1999.

year. Refugees arriving in neighboring Zambia said both the army and rebels were again press-gang young men as soldiers in a conflict which has ebbed and flowed for more than 20 years. An estimated 500,000 people have died. The U.N. lost 60 staff members during its involvement in Angola, including personnel aboard two charter aircraft which were shot down in December and January. ■

FRANCE

An unusual journey

The setting is the Parc de la Villette in the center of Paris but the scene is familiar to refugees around the world. Inside a 1,500 square meter tent, people sit on hard benches clutching handfuls of immigration forms waiting fretfully for an interview with a hostile official. The 'refugees' are, in fact, visitors to an exhibition organized by UNHCR and several non-governmental organizations to mark the 50th anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. 'An Unusual Journey' allows day-trippers who pay the equivalent of \$6 for the experience, to become temporary refugees and live the lives of any one of 12 individuals ranging from a Kurdish Iraqi guerrilla to an anti-government exile from the former Zaire, in their quest to seek a safe refuge from persecution.



One of the organizers, Pedro Vianna, fled persecution in Brazil and Chile before arriving in France. Some of the 'government officials' in the sketch are refugees. An estimated 6,000 people have experienced their own 'Unusual Journey' and many later said they would have found it impossible to complete a real refugee trek. ■

■ Canada and the U.S. have broken up the first known large-scale alien smuggling operation which transported more than 3,600 Chinese across the common border.

■ The United States deported 300,000 illegal immigrants in the last two years, more than twice the number who were sent back in the previous two years.

■ The number of asylum applications jumped 72 percent to 41,300 in Switzerland last year, because of a large increase of people from Yugoslavia.

■ The U.S. has agreed not to deport illegal immigrants from Central American countries hardest hit by Hurricane Mitch for at least 18 months.

GENEVA

Applications on the rise

The number of asylum applications in 24 European countries in 1998 totalled 366,180 people, an increase of 27 percent compared with 1997. The rise was attributed mainly

to an increased number of people fleeing the conflict in Kosovo. Four countries – Germany, the United Kingdom, the Netherlands and Switzerland – received two-thirds of the asy-

lum applications. The five countries which received the largest number of applications when compared with their own populations were Switzerland, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Belgium and Norway. Around 100,000 Yugoslavs, mainly Albanian Kosovars, asked for asylum. ■

CENTRAL AFRICA

Tanzania: A safe haven once more

Chaos gripped parts of Central Africa again in early 1998. In the turbulent eastern parts of the Democratic Republic of Congo where a three-way conflict between government troops, anti-government rebels and local Mai-Mai guerrillas continued, civilians took refuge in neighboring Tanzania. As many as 1,000 people a day paid 10 dollars for a one-way ticket on leaky fishing vessels to escape the carnage. Most headed for the Tanzanian town of Kigoma where UNHCR transferred them



Civilians fleeing the latest fighting in the Congo Democratic Republic arrive by boat in Tanzania.

to the Lugufu refugee camp 90 kilometers (56 miles) to the east. By the end of January at least 30,000 people had arrived, some telling stories of massacres during the fighting. Tanzania currently hosts 358,000 refugees, 280,000 from Burundi, 65,000 from Democratic Congo and 13,000 from Rwanda. There was also renewed trouble in Kin-

shasa's western neighbor, Congo Brazzaville, where government soldiers and 'Ninja' militia battled in and around the capital, Brazzaville. At least 40,000 people fled the scene, half of them citizens of Democratic Congo. UNHCR maintained a skeleton staff in the area making daytrips across the Congo River in Kinshasa. ■

CAMBODIA

A new start

They had lived under the control of the Khmer Rouge for decades. But earlier this year, several thousand Cambodians left a Thai refugee camp at Phu Noi and accepted an offer by UNHCR to resettle anywhere in Cambodia they chose – in this case

Mondolkiri and Kompot in eastern Cambodia. The refugees had fled to Thailand in May when the Khmer Rouge stronghold at Anlong Veng fell to government troops. The civilians had effectively lived under Khmer Rouge control since 1975, but

will now have the chance of a new beginning, free of the discredited regime for the first time. Elsewhere, UNHCR reported that land-mines continued to pose a danger to returnees, especially in western Cambodia where several people were recently wounded. ■

Seeking asylum

SIERRA LEONE

The war goes on

Rebels and ECOMOG troops fought for control of the Sierra Leone capital of Freetown early this year as the war in that West African country dragged on. Nearly a half million people have already fled a nation the U.N. describes as the world's poorest country and thousands more were displaced in the latest battles. High Commissioner Sadako Ogata warned in a letter to regional leaders that the situation was deteriorating towards a repeat of the previous year when reports of widespread torture and maiming by rebels first surfaced.

GEORGIA

New moves in Georgia

The U.N. Security Council has extended the U.N. peacekeeping mission in Georgia for six months until the end of July. The Council also adopted a unanimous resolution calling for a comprehensive settlement of the political status of Georgia's breakaway Abkhazia region. Nearly 300,000 Georgians fled Abkhazia when civil war erupted in 1992 and as many as 10,000 people were killed in the fighting.

UNHCR

A new budget

UNHCR needs a total of nearly \$915 million for its 1999 operations to help an estimated 22 million refugees and other displaced persons. "The funds... around 11 cents per refugee per day... can make a huge difference in the lives of the most vulnerable people in the world," High Commissioner Sadako Ogata said in a foreword to the organization's 360-page global appeal. The funds will be used not only in traditional refugee situations, but also to help people returning to areas devastated by war.

“WHY DID I SURVIVE AND OTHER HOSTAGES DIDN'T?”

Vincent Cochetel recounts a harrowing tale of torture and endurance

by Ray Wilkinson

Professionally, it was a wonderful time for Vincent Cochetel. As the head of UNHCR's office in the northern Caucasus region, Cochetel was trying to help tens of thousands of persons displaced by the conflict in Chechnya, Ossetia and Ingushetia and loving every minute.

“It was a fascinating melting pot of peoples, ideas and work,” he says. “In the morning you might meet a president to discuss strategy and a few hours later be splashing through the mud to help a destitute family.”

He was separated from his wife and two young daughters for the first time, and like many humanitarian workers disliked that part of the job. But he had been involved as a ‘militant activist’ on behalf of the downtrodden since he was eight years old when he had fasted for the safety of Spanish priests gaoled during the Franco regime and awaiting execution.

GUNMEN COME CALLING

The Caucasus region was already a dangerous place when Cochetel arrived and he was under no illusions. Like other organizations UNHCR hired armed guards and armored vehicles. In their daily routine, Cochetel and his colleagues used decoy cars and never followed a regular routine in an attempt to deceive would-be kidnapers or killers.

But as he unlocked the door to his seventh floor apartment in a crumbling Soviet-era tower block in the city of Vladikavkaz at 10 p.m. on the night of January 29, 1998 three gunmen, each armed with two pistols and their faces covered in heavy balclavas, rushed from the darkness.

Cochetel was forced to kneel on the floor of his tiny kitchen, a gun jammed into his neck. “I was just waiting for the shot,” he said. “I remembered a scene from the movie *The Killing Fields* (set during the genocide in Cambodia) when people were being murdered and I thought I don't want to die like that, like a dog.”

The Frenchman, who was born in the provincial city of Tours in 1961, was not executed as he expected, but for the next 317 days he was held prisoner in appalling conditions.

He was stuffed into the boot of a car for three days, was regularly beaten, manacled virtually the whole period of his imprisonment and underwent several mock executions. One attempt to free him in April, 1998 backfired at the last minute and for nine months he was kept in a series of cellars and saw natural daylight only once during that entire period.

“I was just waiting for the shot” in the back of the neck...

He survived mostly on a thin gruel of hot water, occasionally spiced with a potato, carrot or onion. On one occasion he was given a chicken leg and the next day, in what his guards thought was a huge joke, the bare bone of the same chicken leg to eat. His captors told him he was being held for ransom, mentioning sums ranging from 1.5 to six million dollars.

HELD IN A CAR BOOT

His first days in captivity were almost his last. He was bundled into a car after leaving his apartment and one kidnapper “tried to knock me out by smashing his pistol into my neck. He had probably seen too many bad movies,” Cochetel said. He was

then stuffed into the rear of the car for three days.

“I concentrated on breathing and not panicking and protecting myself from the cold,” he said recently. When he complained at one point that he was freezing in the sub-zero temperatures, his captors started the car engine but that attempt at would-be kindness backfired when Cochetel almost suffocated in the deadly fumes.

He was moved from North Ossetia to neighboring Chechnya and remembers that when he reached there, “it was the first time I had been to Chechnya and not feared being kidnapped. I was already kidnapped.”

He realized something else, too. His captivity would be a long one. “Other colleagues had been kidnapped and the average time they had been held was 3 1/2 months,” he said. “I knew I had to be patient.”

During his first month in Chechnya he was interrogated at least 10 times, one hour a day. He adopted a survival routine. In the series of dank, dark cellars he would call home for 10 months he was always chained to his metal bed by handcuffs and a one meter long cable. That allowed him to walk exactly four steps. “I always dreamed of making that additional fifth step,” he said.

He exercised twice a day, 1 1/2 hours each time, running in place, doing press ups and strengthening his stomach muscles. He was given a chunk of Georgian bread and would only eat it after exercising “as a reward to myself.” Even in the darkness, he deliberately established a routine, carefully putting on his glasses each ‘morning’ (he never knew whether it really was morning or the middle of the night) as an indication that his day ‘had started.’

He squatted for hours on his bed simply listening, to footsteps, to the birds in the morning and frogs at night.

He heard children going to school, and those times were among his worst moments. “The children became a symbol of every-



Vincent Cochetel with his wife Florence, at a news conference shortly after ending 317 days in captivity.

thing I had lost and a symbol of the real world," he said. "It was terribly depressing."

There were other bad moments, too. Two of his guards at one point thanked him for the assistance UNHCR had provided when they were displaced persons. That seemingly kind remark sent him into a tail-spin, leaving him wondering about the rationale for his humanitarian work.

In October last year, several young, drunk guards staged one of several mock executions, firing their weapons around his head.

"I broke down a couple of times, but never in front of them," he said. "I did it under my blanket. My blanket was my hidden garden. At times there was a very thin line between being sane and being crazy."

ESCAPE ATTEMPTS

He tried to unpick the lock of his handcuffs. "In the movies they do it in one minute. I pulled some wire from my mattress and it took me 15 days to open the cuffs, but I still couldn't escape from the cellar." On another occasion he tried to unpick the metal cable tying him to the bed. He was discovered on each occasion and beaten.

Cochetel's release came amidst a blizzard of gunfire on December 12 last year. He was driven to a rendezvous, handcuffed and blindfolded, where he changed cars and captors.

Shooting erupted. One of Cochetel's guards in the rear seat slumped over the prisoner, possibly dead. The Frenchman crawled or was pushed – he doesn't remember – out of the vehicle and sheltered near its rear wheel. Shouts in Russian "Where is the hostage?" and "On the floor" mingled with the cacophony of machine-gun, pistol, rifle and grenade fire and shouts in the Chechen language.

He was eventually dragged and pushed into another vehicle and thrown on the floor where he felt a military helmet. "I knew then, for the first time, I was on the right side," he said. His captors and Chechen fighters did not wear helmets. He had been rescued by Russian special forces, one of whom politely apologized, "I am sorry, I don't have a key for your handcuffs."

Cochetel, 23 kilograms lighter and sporting a huge black beard which he said had "acted as my calendar during my captivity," was whisked to Moscow after a blizzard of celebratory vodkas with his rescuers and then on to Geneva for a short reunion with his family. There was one final bureaucratic hitch in Moscow. His flight home was delayed for more than two

hours because he did not have an exit visa from Russia.

Four days before Cochetel's release four foreign hostages had been brutally murdered in Chechnya and one of Cochetel's first reactions after his release was guilt. "Why did I survive and other hostages didn't?" he asks now. He was always a worrier, always planning ahead for the next work assignment or the next holiday. "Now

I have learned that the future is the next hour." He reads, watches a rerun of the world cup soccer final won by France, talks with friends (including former hostages) and finds the greatest pleasure in doing simple things such as taking his girls to school or standing in the rain.

But he continues to fight the demons of his captivity. He cannot go near an underground parking lot or into a cellar to pick out a good bottle of wine. He misses his three-hour daily workouts but says he needs to find "a different way to keep fit" and get rid of some accumulated violence.

Above all, he wants to fade from the international spotlight. "I want to become a full family man again with my wife, Florence and daughters Sarah and Salomé, and resume my work. I would like to become anonymous and get on with my life." ■

"I broke down a couple of times, but never in front of them."



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A lifelong achievement

Hari Brissimi, a former longtime UNHCR official, has been honored by the Athens Academy with its highest individual award, The Silver Medal, for a lifetime of outstanding work on behalf of the needy. From a very early age during the German occupation of Greece in World War Two, she organized meals for undernourished children in her home town of Volos. She taught English and asked for payment in food which she then donated to the needy. Later, while studying in the United States, she founded an organization which collected clothes and other assistance for poor villages in Greece. She worked in UNHCR between 1955-80, becoming the first woman to be promoted to the senior rank of director. After her retirement she helped found the Greek Council for Refugees in 1989, of which she is the elected president. ■

Hurricane Mitch

When Hurricane Mitch devastated Central America, the remote Nicaraguan village of Wiliwili was virtually destroyed when the local river rose 25 meters. Three weeks after the disaster Fabio Varoli, food aid coordinator with UNHCR's emergency response team, reached the area and began a quick impact project (QIP) to provide shelter for the survivors. Materials were hauled laboriously up the river and Fabio said the project had "both a physical and psychological impact because the people of this remote village felt they had not been abandoned and they had a roof over their heads." Varoli's participation was the first time a UNHCR staff member had participated in a so-called UNDAC (U.N. Disaster Assessment and Coordination) team which assists in such calamities. The U.N. Development Program is assessing whether similar shelter projects will be useful in other emergencies. ■



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Victims in a makeshift settlement in Nicaragua.

A global jamboree

The 19th World Scout Jamboree was held in Pícarquin, Chile in late December and January. It was attended by 34,000 scouts and guides from 160 nations and UNHCR promoted several activities at the gathering. UNHCR has agreements with both the World Organization of the Scout Movement and the World Association of Girl Guides and Girl Scouts to promote joint projects to help refugees and the jamboree provided an excellent venue to continue these activities. UNHCR presented videos on refugees and the organization's work. It organized two workshops each day, including a simulation game called "Passages" in which scouts and guides participated as actors in a typical refugee situation. A news conference on refugee rights and human rights was staged in cooperation with Amnesty International and a photo exhibit on the same subject was also presented. ■



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Obituary: Leo Cherne

Leo Cherne, a lawyer, economist and businessman, who transformed the International Rescue Committee into one of the largest agencies in the world helping refugees, died early this year in Manhattan at the age of 86. Mr. Cherne became chairman of the IRC in 1951. The Committee had been formed with the modest aim of helping to rescue a few thousand people from Nazi-occupied France during World War Two, but in subsequent decades the New York-based organization helped hundreds of thousands of people throughout the world. Cherne was awarded the U.S. Medal of Freedom in 1984 and was cited by President Ronald Reagan for his "moral passion in serving the cause of human freedom, especially through his work on behalf of refugees." ■

The Hungarian connection

UNHCR's Hungary office has awarded its Menedek Prize for 1998 to the government Office of the Parliamentary Ombudsperson for its work in general and its efforts on behalf of aliens, asylum seekers and refugees. The prize was established in 1995 to recognize outstanding activities benefitting refugees and asylum seekers in Hungary. Professor Katalin Gonczol, Parliamentary Commissioner for Human Rights received the award because he had "personally devoted considerable time and energy to investigate and assess the situation of foreigners in Hungary, especially those whose freedom of movement has been limited." The \$2,500 prize money will be used to promote the work of the Ombudsperson's office. ■



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UNHCR participated in relief efforts for victims of a devastating drought in the Sahel region of western Africa in 1974. Women and children scramble in the sand for fallen grain after a cereal distribution along the border between Mali and Upper Volta.

