



Cegrane Refugee Camp, Macedonia, July 1999. Photos: Anne Rigby

## The Kosovo refugees who don't want to go home

The approach of the European winter threatens new hardship for thousands of refugees in Macedonia—victims of the war in the former Yugoslavia—who fled Kosovo and other parts of Southern Serbia some months ago. While the great majority of the refugees have moved back across the border into Kosovo, there are still around 4,500 refugees sheltering in two Macedonian camps operated by CARE Australia. Many of these refugees are refusing or delaying the return home, claiming they have no future in Kosovo or Southern Serbia.

Jo Hutton, a CARE Australia manager and AusAID officer on secondment, was responsible for the management of the Stenkovec and Cegrane camps in Macedonia. In this interview, she speaks of the need to relocate the refugees as winter approaches.

### **WHAT IS THE CURRENT PREDICAMENT OF REFUGEES WHO REMAIN IN MACEDONIAN CAMPS?**

At the moment the two camps, Stenkovec II and Cegrane are home for about 4,500 refugees of varying ethnic background. At the height of the crisis there were about

260,000 refugees in Macedonia with over 100,000 of these in eight camps. Now most have returned and resettled in Kosovo. But in Stenkovec II, the refugees are predominantly gypsies from Kosovo who are reluctant to return. They believe they have no future back in Kosovo.

There are also Kosovo Albanians and a group from the Presovo border zone of Southern Serbia. What they have in common is a reluctance to return home, even though they are being offered assistance by humanitarian organisations including CARE once they get there. This includes shelter, food, other essential items and help with rebuilding destroyed homes. But most of the remaining population don't want to go back and are hoping to be resettled in a third country. Of course, this is very difficult because there are very limited offers from other countries to take them in permanently.

**WHAT ARE CONDITIONS LIKE IN THE CAMPS?**

With the return of so many refugees to their homes in Kosovo, conditions for those who remain have improved. Although they

are still living in tents they have adequate access to clean water, washing and sanitation facilities and medical services. We have also built communal kitchens so everyone can do their own cooking, which is a great improvement.

However with the onset of winter we will have new problems—the camps simply aren't designed to shelter people from metres of snow and sub-zero temperatures. A decision will have to be made during the next month to transfer the refugees to more suitable accommodation or to start the 'winterisation' of the camps. I think it's most likely that the refugees will be moved to collective centres or to host families in the community in line with the decision which UNHCR has taken.

**WHAT IS THE ATMOSPHERE IN THE CAMPS?**

For the most part the people have accepted

their plight, but there were recent aggressive demonstrations when it was suggested that they might have to move to host families. This is by far our greatest challenge—trying to find a home for this remnant refugee population. Many of the Kosovo Albanians are slowly coming to terms with the prospect of returning; they understand that being poor alone is not a reason for being a refugee.

**WHAT'S BEEN THE RESPONSE OF THE PEOPLE OF MACEDONIA?**

Macedonia is a small country with significant challenges of its own. It's struggling to overcome a depressed economy, high unemployment, insufficient community and health services and poverty in rural areas. To its credit, Macedonia accepted the influx of refugees, 260,000 at the height of the crisis, and has continued



Faces of the children of Kosovo. These photographs were taken at Stenkovec II Refugee Camp, Macedonia, in July and August 1999.



to support them. The refugee population represented 12 per cent of Macedonia's population—that's the equivalent of Australia taking in about 2 million refugees from a country like East Timor. It was an enormous number for a small and economically disadvantaged country like Macedonia.

Aid agencies and international donors acknowledge that they must now help with the rehabilitation of Macedonia and this includes health programs, infrastructure development and capacity building.

### **THE AUSTRALIAN GOVERNMENT HAS PROVIDED A TOTAL OF \$6.5M TO ASSIST THE VICTIMS OF THE KOSOVO CRISIS.**

### **WHAT CONTRIBUTION HAS THE AUSTRALIAN GOVERNMENT'S ASSISTANCE MADE TO THE STENKOVEC AND CEGRANE CAMPS?**

Through AusAID, our government has provided \$500,000 for camp management and procurement programs, including the purchase of relief items like bedding and food. It's also supplied funding for hygiene kits for people in the camps.

### **WHAT IS THE FUTURE OF THE CAMPS?**

We had hoped to be in a position to relocate the refugees and close the camps in September. This hasn't been possible but as I explained earlier, it is critical that once winter arrives, the refugees must already have been relocated to more suitable winter accommodation. ■

Jo Hutton plans to leave Macedonia soon. An AusAID program manager, Vyrene Smith, will take over the management of all programs in the mission. Jo Hutton describes her first experience working with an NGO as a 'baptism of fire'. Her first assignment was in Belgrade, Yugoslavia where she worked with CARE workers Steve Pratt and Peter Wallace who were later detained and held in custody by the Yugoslav Government authorities. At the time of their arrest she was in Egypt with Steve Pratt's wife, Samira. Jo Hutton was recently named ACT Young Australian of the year for her aid work.

# Rebuilding their lives: Australia responds to the Turkish earthquake tragedy

Australia watched with horror as the tragedy of a devastating earthquake unfolded in Turkey on 17 August. The earthquake, registering 7.4 on the Richter scale, had its epicentre just east of Istanbul.

The US National Earthquake Information Centre described the earthquake as 'one of the most powerful recorded in the 20th century'. Turkish President Suleyman Demirel estimated that over 20,000 people died, 25,000 people were injured and 100,000 people were left homeless as a result of the earthquake.

The Australian Government was quick to respond to the needs of those most affected, contributing a total of \$3.5 million to assist with relief efforts.

This assistance was provided after consultation with the Turkish authorities and international relief agencies to ensure it was the most effective form of help that Australia could offer.

Australia's contribution was directed to the United Nations Development Programme, the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies, the United Nations Office for Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs and the United Nations Children's Fund.

To date, Australian assistance has been used by these relief agencies to provide urgently needed items such as food, clothing, medical and hygiene supplies and community psychosocial support.

Australia's contribution has also been used by these organisations to purchase

more than 550 tents, 30 water tanks, 1,100 mobile toilets and 1,000 blankets.

This will particularly help the poor who have lost what little they had. One young woman at the tent city of Derince said tearfully: 'Conditions are pretty good here, but it's not like home. Home is just a pile of rubble now.'

Despite assistance from the international community, there is much to be done in terms of the reconstruction of Izmet and Istanbul. The UN estimates that 1,500 collapsed buildings have been removed. However, a further 7,500 buildings are heavily damaged. With the risk of collapse, these need to be demolished urgently.

It is clear that the situation will continue to be rough going for the survivors, particularly now that homeless people are facing a bitter winter in Turkey. However, through the provision of clothing, generators, hospitals, housing and tents, people from around the world, the UN, Australia and other countries have heeded the call to assist with emergency relief and reconstruction. ■