

— Serbia-Montenegro — *Complex Emergency*

During September 1998, Yugoslav Army (VJ) troops and Serb police began an offensive in areas north of Pristina for the first time since February 1998, when Serb forces began retaliating against members of the KLA. As a result of the September offensive, nearly 500,000 people were internally displaced and tens of thousands fled Kosovo for Albania, Macedonia, and Montenegro. On October 13, 1998, U.S. Chief of Mission Richard Miles declared a disaster for Serbia-Montenegro, reporting that affected populations were in dire need of food, shelter, and medical intervention as the cold Balkan winter arrived.

On October 14, 1998, BHR/OFDA deployed a USAID/DART to Pristina to coordinate USG relief activities and to focus its relief efforts on providing for the shelter, food, water/sanitation, and health needs of those displaced by fighting. On October 27, 1998, U.S. Special Envoy Richard Holbrooke and Yugoslav President Slobodan Milosevic signed an agreement that allowed IDPs to begin returning to their homes. By mid-November, an estimated 60,000 IDPs had returned to their villages despite continued security problems. Many Serb police checkpoints throughout Kosovo were dismantled and freedom of movement for ethnic Albanians increased.

At the end of December 1998, however, renewed clashes between Serb forces and the KLA drove tens of thousands of people from their homes again, and by mid-February 1999, some 45,000 people were newly

displaced, raising the total number of IDPs to an estimated 210,000. The renewed insecurity was

also accompanied by increasing harassment of relief workers. These problems, coupled with the breakdown in peace negotiations at the talks in Rambouillet, France and the threat of NATO air strikes, led to the departure of international relief staff, including the USAID/DART, which evacuated to Skopje, Macedonia on February 19.

The overall situation in Kosovo changed dramatically on March 19 when the VJ attacked key KLA strongholds and destroyed communication lines along the periphery of the province. On March 23, Serbian security forces began setting fire to random villages and expelling ethnic Albanians from cities unknown for any hostile activity. On March 24, in response to the initial NATO air strikes on Kosovo and Serbia, VJ, Serb police, and paramilitary forces stepped-up their campaign to expel ethnic Albanians from Kosovo. They did so by causing widespread destruction in rural villages and urban areas throughout the province. Large populations of ethnic Albanians fled across nearby borders into Albania, Macedonia, and Montenegro. In addition to extensive reports of abuses by Serbian forces, refugees increasingly reported a lack of food as the major reason for continued displacement. While early arrivals were in relatively good health, later arrivals showed signs of poor health from living out in the open for days before reaching the borders. At the height of

the forced evacuation in early June, the Yugoslav government had forced nearly 40% of Kosovo's total ethnic Albanian population to flee the province. In addition, more than 500 villages were reported emptied or burned.

Rapid progress toward a peace accord at the beginning of June made

it possible for a small return of relief organizations to Kosovo; WFP gained access in early June, and the



An ethnic Albanian elementary school on the outskirts of Pristina burned by Serb forces during the conflict (photo by Jamy Bond, BHR/OFDA).



A family returns to its home. The home was damaged in the conflict by Serb forces and repaired with materials from the BHR/OFDA roofing project (photo by Paul Majorowitz, BHR/OFDA).

first ICRC food convoys reached Pristina on June 3. Significant numbers of people seeking refuge in other towns or in the countryside remained cut off from food by the fighting. In an effort to assist those in need of emergency food commodities, BHR/OFDA contracted IRC to airdrop HDRs into Kosovo. With two flights per day, IRC was able to drop more than 500,000 HDRs to help feed IDPs who were hiding in the mountains and forests of Kosovo.

Departing Serb forces left Kosovo littered with land mines and booby traps. Despite pleas by U.N. and relief agencies for refugees to wait until Kosovo had been declared safe, refugees began streaming back into the province only hours after the first NATO troops entered. By June 17, refugees were returning nearly as quickly as they had arrived, with 15,000 reportedly crossing in a single 24-hour period. The repatriation continued unabated, with spontaneous repatriation vastly outnumbering organized efforts.

IDPs returning to the province found that one-third of the 365,000 homes throughout Kosovo had been damaged during the conflict, leaving an estimated 720,000 to 840,000 people without adequate shelter. In the approximately 2,000 towns and villages in Kosovo, 48,861 houses were destroyed beyond repair, and 33,476 were severely damaged. The need for humanitarian shelter response was enormous, and by early September, more than 60 NGOs were involved in shelter programs throughout Kosovo.

BHR/OFDA played a lead role in providing shelter for returning vulnerable Kosovars. Through its Emergency Habitability and Winterization Program (EHWP), a “self-help” effort for returnees to create a habitable and winterized space in their homes, BHR/OFDA funded several NGOs to provide more than 20,000 emergency shelter kits and 8,000 roofing kits to meet the needs of 162,000 people. The program focused primarily on rural areas that sustained the most extensive damage during the conflict. It provided basic shelter materials and