The Year in Disasters 1993

Former Yugoslavia: the challenge for agencies

War, hunger and poverty in the former Yugoslavia ensured a continuing disaster affecting millions in 1993, with well over three million refugees and entire populations within which hardly anyone was untouched by conflict or economic decline. The year also saw the international humanitarian aid operation under growing pressure.

Since the conflict began in 1991, the Yugoslav crisis has been constantly changing - shifting borders, growing numbers of people affected, increasing problems, new difficulties, rising costs. For the humanitarian community trying to react, the speed, scale and complexity of the disaster has forced a great deal of innovation and ad hoc solutions, and limited careful planning and considered actions, at least in the early stages.

The former Yugoslavia has been one of the biggest and most complex humanitarian operations ever undertaken, with the largest number of refugees in Europe since the second world war. It has also been a high-risk and directly hostile situation: not only have civilians been the principal target of the conflict through so-called ethnic cleansing, but humanitarian operations and staff have been systematically obstructed and attacked by all sides.

For many agencies with broad experience in the developing world, the crisis in the former Yugoslavia has been a very new environment in which to work. It holds a unique combination of challenges, from the demands for fuel and shelter in long European winters to the pressures of politicised aid operations under a media spotlight just a few hours drive from most European capitals. There are also the high expectations of articulate refugees and displaced people well able to express their rage and frustration by, for example, building a symbolic wall around UN military headquarters to protest at its "failure to act".

While early 1994 saw positive moves towards peace, throughout 1993 efforts to find political solutions and bring peace in the former Yugoslavia faltered and failed, while the conflict continued and the economies of all the republics declined. As the costs of war, impact of sanctions and exodus of skilled workers and capital abroad all grew, economies contracted and inflation climbed.

This deepened the vulnerability of many different types of people. For those in work, costs rose and wages fell in value, many more became unemployed and received little in benefits, while seasonal and casual work declined or disappeared. Fixed income pensioners saw prices climb and savings decline, while state employees - doctors, teachers, civil servants - watched as monthly salaries failed to keep up with inflation, and pressures grew on those with large families.

Almost every State created from the former Yugoslavia has faced a collapsing tax base, inflation and contracting overall economy just as the growing numbers in need increased the financial demands. Health, education and welfare - including the needs of the mentally and physically disabled - all came under pressure.

By the end of 1993, the war in the former Yugoslavia had produced at least 3.7 million refugees and displaced people, driven from their homes by violence, rape, terror, hunger and cold. Many moved abroad, but most are still within the borders of the former Yugoslavia. The vast majority of those still in the former Yugoslavia are not in camps or "collective centres" - hotels, holiday camps, barracks and other public buildings - but staying with "host families", usually friends or relatives, however distant.

For most, this was intended as a very short-term situation before returning to their home area or a move elsewhere, including resettlement in other countries. For many reasons - including cost, comfort, speed and flexibility - host families were a very positive short-term option, especially since the alternative would probably have been vast tented camps.

The continued conflict prevented millions from going home, and resistance has grown in some countries to refugees from the former Yugoslavia Such resistance has created new problems, including those multiply-displaced, such as refugees deported back to the country of first asylum, particularly the hard-pressed countries neighbouring the former Yugoslavia. The refugee issue is just one of the many ways in which the conflict has affected all the countries of the region, from the cost of sanctions to the loss of markets, in addition to the transformations of economies since the end of the cold war. There are many links between the peoples of the former Yugoslavia and minorities throughout the region - Hungarians in Voyvodina or Albanians in Kosovo - as well as the disputes between Greece and the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, which could regionise the conflict and its effects

As few of the refugees and displaced people who moved in have moved on, and the planned weeks of stay have become months and years, the difficulties have deepened. Such refugees and displaced people are clearly vulnerable, yet spread among a host population they are harder to find, their needs are more difficult to assess and they can be problematic to reach with services or goods. Their crowded presence in family homes - three or four people per room in small homes is common - fosters social and psychological tensions, and can create hygiene and health problems. The natural sharing of resources initially helps maintain nutrition and health standards but, without significant outside help from State or aid agencies, this ultimately impoverishes and makes vulnerable both the hosts and their guests

Within overcrowded collective centres constantly draped with damp washing, refugees and displaced people experience severe tensions, fears and depression, the results of the physical or psychological trauma almost all have been through, and the present uncertainty of their lives. The destruction of everything that was the past - home, job, family, community, possessions - together with frequent refusal to accept that there is, for most, no chance of return, makes any effort to face the future difficult. Many are overwhelmed with despair and grief, despite all the efforts of national and international aid staff, including more than 200 social workers within the social welfare programme set up by the Federation and National Societies.

One refugee relief official working in Zagreb was prompted to recall his own experience as a wartime refugee in Europe. "You don't do anything, you just sit and wait. Making any kind of effort means you get cold, wet, dirty, hungry and tired. Either help will come and life will get better, in which case why bother, or it won't, and there is nothing you can do about it. That was our attitude, and at least we knew that the war was over and we had peace." One extra factor enforces refugee passivity: the policy of all republics of the former Yugoslavia of non-integration, keeping refugees outside the host social system with the intention of their eventual removal

One important shift in humanitarian needs in the former Yugoslavia during 1993 was the changing balance between refugees and displaced people in several republics and the in-

creasing numbers and needs of so-called "social cases" in the host population. While it is always hard to have complete confidence in statistics about highly-mobile populations, in several republics the numbers of refugees and displaced people appear to have fallen, while the figures for social cases have shot up.

Overall numbers of beneficiaries depending on aid in Bosnia-Herzegovina - refugees, displaced people and social cases - jumped from 810,000 in January 1993 to 2,740,000 by December 1993, as reported by UNHCR. But, in Croatia, refugee numbers went from 573,000 to 542,000, in Serbia from 463,000 to 328,000, and in Montenegro from 64,000 to 31,000 There was no official change in refugee figures for Macedonia, with a total of 32,240 people there from Bosnia-Herzegovina, Croatia and Albania.

The reasons for the falling refugee numbers are unclear, since those who leave rarely explain their departure, but probably include some people returning to their homes or regions as situations stabilise, many more moving on to other countries inside or outside the former Yugoslavia without remaining registered with UNHCR or governments, and pressure on men in officially-registered refugee families to enlist in military forces or face charges of desertion.

Aid agencies in all republics have faced the growing crisis of assisting entire sections of populations made vulnerable by war, displacement and economic crisis. The catch-all term of "social case" covers those pushed into poverty by unemployment, the very many women-headed households, almost all pensioners, and workers whose incomes have been eroded by rampant inflation.

The largest increase in social cases has been seen in Serbia-Montenegro, where the government's entire focus is on war not people's welfare, and economic sanctions imposed by the UN Security Council have both destroyed economic activity and hampered efforts by aid organisations - including UN specialised agencies - to meet the growing humanitarian needs of ordinary people

With 70% unemployment and 1993 inflation of perhaps 25,000%, Serbia-Montenegro has at least 1.7 million social cases in or close to destitution because their benefits or pensions are worthless and their life savings are exhausted. In the harsher climate of Europe, city dwellers cannot easily "go back to the land", while farmers are reluctant to sell their crops for cash in an economic crisis in which there is little to buy. The 78 soup kitchens planned in Serbia may keep people alive, but hand-outs and old clothes will have little impact on the political and economic processes that could ensure their future. Even if sanctions are lifted, most will never regain what they have lost in homes, possessions and savings.

In the developing world, disaster response often includes supporting farmers and herdspeople to maintain their "capital" in terms of livestock, with free or subsidised animals, wa-

Feeding the family in Knin

		Cost/day (US$ at current exchange rate)		
Food Items	**Gm/day**	**April**	**July**	**September**
Wheat flour	450	0.61	1.30	3.00
Oil (litre)	30	0.30	0.41	0.37
Sugar	25	0.10	0.26	0.38
Total		1.01	1.97	3.75
Av. salary (as US$)		12.00	6.67	3.39
Total as % average salary		4.70	29.60	96.60

Food prices across much of the former Yugoslavia have been hit by hyper-inflation. By September 1993, the standard family food basket in Knin (in one of the UN protected areas) cost 96.6% of the average salary. With such high prices people have to choose between buying food or buying fuel to keep warm, yet they need both

Source: WHO Former Yugoslavia Health Monitor 1993

ter supplies and veterinary care. In the new disasters of Europe and the former Soviet Union, who will help those facing economic crisis maintain their "capital": money in the bank? In February 1994, one relief worker in the Serbian capital, Belgrade, wrote that "it becomes more and more incomprehensible how ordinary people seemingly manage to carry on".

He added that sanctions, inflation and the collapse of the economy meant that "the number of social cases is increasing rapidly and may well take on emergency proportions in the near future. The absence of the traditional third world scenario - emaciated and sickly people clad in rags forming silent queues while patiently waiting for something to happen - is very deceiving. Here people are well dressed and looking healthy, they chat about this and that, you can see smiles and even laughter, when they gather in the entry hall of the soup kitchen. You need to ask questions to understand what is going on. Soon you will find that most of the old folks have not got their pension of Deutsche Marks 3-4 per month for several months Many of the younger ones have no jobs and accordingly no salaries; others have, in addition, someone sick at home without medical care and no bedding or hot water. Some may not have had a decent meal for many days."

Some families benefit from money sent back by relatives working abroad, but an increasing number of others hosting refugees and displaced people are having to ask their guests to leave for collective centres as they cannot afford to help any longer. From the start, 95% of refugees and displaced people in Serbia-Montenegro were absorbed into host families' homes, creating an invisible burden, logistical problems and tensions between the settled population and those who may be perceived as privileged newcomers Refugees receive food parcels from UNHCR and the European Community Humanitarian Office through the Serbian Red Cross Society, but host families receive little or nothing.

For aid agencies more used to crises of war and refugees in Asia, Africa and Latin America, the former Yugoslavia has also created new dimensions of need to be met, adding social and psychological stress and trauma to the more obvious problems of poverty, hunger and deprivation. Relatively prosperous and sophisticated societies have been suddenly transformed into chaos and collapse, with ethic cleansing, massacres and allegations that rape has been used to terrorise civilians.

Responding to these conditions, and the particular needs of women and their families, the Federation is now well into the second year of a growing social welfare programme, with 11 experienced social welfare delegates supporting locally-recruited social workers covering almost every part of the former Yugoslavia.

The social welfare programme is intended to suit the conditions of each republic; in Croatia and Macedonia, it focuses on the needs of those refugees living in collective centres, while elsewhere it tries to assist those living with host families. Displacement has a deep social and psychological impact, and many who have fled have also witnessed or experienced human rights violations, as well as experiencing their own loss of homes, possessions, jobs and status.

The programme provides an extended social work service to refugees, offering help with psychological and physical stress and trauma. This includes social activities, reassurance about safety, security and the provision of basic needs, mobilisation of refugees through community work, promotion of primary health care, identifying and assisting the most vulnerable, and - perhaps most importantly - providing a friendly, professional ear to listen to people's problems, thus preventing further breakdown and offering individual support.

In most areas the social welfare programme involves both community activities and individual face-to-face counselling. However, the Centre for Victims of Trauma and Violence in Serbia's capital, Belgrade, pioneered the use of a telephone service with trained counsellors, allow-

ing people to discuss problems anonymously if they wished, or to arrange personal appointments. This service is being gradually expanded into other areas

While necessary and clearly appreciated by refugees, the social welfare programme faces a tougher time in 1994 as the problems and costs of food, shelter, health and water supply grow while international aid resources are harder to find for the former Yugoslavia. There are those who doubt that a social welfare programme of any scale will survive if the choice is between social workers and food for families.

The growing number of social cases, the difficulties of targeting and reaching all refugees and displaced people in need, and the greater costs of food parcels over bulk food, has forced aid agencies to revert to something common in developing world disasters but in Europe more usually seen in city backstreets for the hungry and homeless: the soup kitchen.

In early 1994, the Serbian Red Cross was serving 1,700 meals a day and the Montenegro Red Cross 1,500 meals; during the year, the Federation plans included serving a total of 120,000 meals a day in the countries of the former Yugoslavia. The region's long history of population movements and conflict was underscored in 1993 by proposals from the Federation and the Croatian Red Cross Society to rehabilitate, in the Dalmatian coast city of Split, a soup kitchen which had been operated by nuns almost continuously for 600 years

As well as far lower costs per person fed, the seemingly crude mechanism of the soup kitchen has other advantages: it usually allows a hot meal of nutritional balance without the need for individuals to find or pay for fuel, and - especially where status or culture makes accepting charity shameful - it can be a very efficient method of targeting, through self-selection, only those people in the greatest need.

The disadvantages: it is harder to take food home for the sick, the young and the old, there is no opportunity to sell or exchange food for other preferred items, be it soap or cash, and there are risks that dominant local groups may deny others access to food if supplies are limited.

The scale, complexity and rapidly evolving crisis has emphasised to all agencies operating in the former Yugoslavia the requirement for high-quality local information and grass-roots partners able to operate with the trust of distressed and bewildered people from a wide range of ethnic and religious backgrounds. This has meant a strong role for indigenous religious organisations and for the National Societies that soon developed in each republic after the break-up of the Yugoslavia Red Cross.

With both professional staffs and large numbers of volunteers, National Red Cross Societies have undertaken a large proportion of the delivery of food, medical supplies and hygiene parcels at local level, run warehouses in many parts of the country, developed branch networks able to identify and assess local needs, and acted as operating partners for scores of international organisations, from UN agencies to private voluntary groups.

Through three European winters, conflict targeted on civilians has forced mass population movements and produced enormous demands for shelter in situations where the usual refugee options of tents or providing materials for people to build their own homes are totally inadequate.

While the overstretched hospitality of host families has met the overwhelming majority of needs, barracks, schools and other public buildings have been unable to deal with the remainder, especially since cash-strapped republics have wanted to reclaim hundreds of hotels to generate hard currency from tourism.

One solution has been the use of prefabricated housing to build small villages for refugee communities, which offer cramped but warm and dry accommodation, and the opportunity to develop services and social cohesion The stability of these projects is, however, limited since the refugees cannot "own" their homes or even have the security of a legal rental agreement, while the cost of such housing would be prohibitive on a large scale, except when compared