



# TALK BACK

The Newsletter of the International  
Council of Voluntary Agencies

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## TURKEY KILLS EXCOM CONCLUSION ON DETENTION

Governments have decided to drop any reference to the detention of asylum-seekers in this year's EXCOM protection conclusions, after the Turkish government insisted on linking detention to refugee exclusion.

The decision, which was taken on Tuesday night after a day of futile debate behind closed doors, was welcomed by some NGOs who had become worried that the detention conclusions would turn out so weak as to be dangerous. The general feeling was that bad conclusions are worse than none at all on the topic.

On the other hand, it means that UNHCR's principal decision-making body has failed to come up with a statement on the detention of asylum-seekers – one of the most controversial protection issues on the refugee agenda. At a time when UNHCR is trying to promote its new guidelines on detention, and when several governments are trying hard to find alternatives to detention, this will hardly enhance UNHCR's protection mandate. One government delegate called it "farcical."

What makes the decision even more baffling is that Turkey completely failed to explain the reason for its position. Detention is all about what to do with asylum-seekers who have entered a country and are awaiting status determination. The exclusion clause is about denying refugee status to terrorists, war criminals, and the like.

*see page 3 "Detention"*

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## GOVERNMENTS MUST BUILD PARTNERSHIPS, BUT AVOID BILATERAL ARRANGEMENTS, SAY NGOs TO EXCOM

Governments must help UNHCR to develop partnerships with NGOs and avoid the kind of bilateral arrangements that undermined UNHCR's efforts during the Kosovo crisis, according to the NGO statement to this year's EXCOM.

The statement was delivered Wednesday evening by Anders Ladekarl, Chair of the ICVA Executive Committee, on behalf of the NGOs attending EXCOM.

*see page 4 "Partnerships"*

### TALK BACK

ICVA has been producing Talk Back over the last 6 months as part of its new proactive information strategy. This issue comes at the time of UNHCR's Pre-EXCOM and EXCOM meetings, as well as at ICVA's General Assembly. Talk Back is normally distributed via e-mail and can also be found on the ICVA website: <[www.icva.ch](http://www.icva.ch)>.

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## EDITORIAL

Ed Schenkenberg van Mierop

The NGOs' potential to bring field information to the Geneva-based UN agencies and bodies is still seriously under-utilised. In recent days, both at its General Assembly and at the UNHCR (Pre-) Executive Committee meetings, ICVA received significant feedback on its renewed role as an advocacy network. For example, ICVA's Talk Back is generally appreciated as an important vehicle for raising issues and concerns. But, there is an urgent need to do much more in translating field experience into policy changes, in order to have a greater impact.

For example, there is a tremendous opportunity for the NGOs to contribute their information and views to the meetings of Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC), the UN's humanitarian coordination body. However, NGOs continue to view the IASC as a place where UN agencies fight their turf battles and, therefore, as largely ineffective. They also seem to balance how much can be changed from the 'inside', versus risking the association with bureaucratic, ineffective structures.

UNHCR's Executive Committee, whose annual session is presently ongoing, is another body that could certainly benefit much more from field experience. Unlike their human rights colleagues, few international humanitarian NGOs send their representatives. Too busy with operations, not seeing the need to sit in week-long meetings generally perceived as extremely boring when staff can be more productive elsewhere, are just some of the reasons why these NGOs remain largely absent.

While there may be differences of opinion as to what is more effective – publicly criticising UNHCR in field situations or contributing to an abstract policy debate – it is clear that these meetings risk creating their own realities if field-based perspectives on the situation of refugees and displaced persons are not sufficiently raised. As a result, the decisions taken do not address – and even may widen – the gap further between policy and daily practice. ICVA is committed to stop this trend.

## **NGOs PLAN MEETING ON THE NORTH CAUCASUS AS 150,000 ARE DISPLACED BY FIGHTING IN CHECHNYA**

Two prominent NGOs will hold a day-long briefing on the current crisis in the North Caucasus in Geneva on October 12.

The day-long meeting is being organised by the Norwegian Refugee Council and the UK-based Forum for Early Warning and Early Response (FEWER). The meeting will hear from a Russian Deputy Minister, and five NGOs from the region that are working with displaced and refugees.

The current fighting in Chechnya has forced 33,000 Chechens into Dagestan, and another 120,000 into Ingushetia, according to Patrick Daru, an expert on the region at the Norwegian Refugee Council.

Mrs Ogata, the High Commissioner for Refugees said in her opening EXCOM statement that both Ingushetia and Russia have asked UNHCR for help. But, she warned, "criminal gangs" make it very difficult for UNHCR to deploy staff in the region. Vincent Cochetel, head of the UNHCR office in Vladikavkaz spent almost a year in captivity after being kidnapped.

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### **Detention Dropped**

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Turkey insisted on linking these two totally separate concepts in the same paragraph, even though UNHCR officials warned that it could have the effect of associating refugee claimants with terrorism. But the Turkish delegate refused to yield. After it became clear that no consensus would be found, the chairman decided to drop the entire detention clause.

Human rights NGOs were generally relieved, because the latest draft conclusions seemed likely to weaken the fundamental principle

expressed in the 1986 Conclusion (#44), which stated categorically that "in view of the hardship that it involved, detention should normally be avoided." The new draft stated that "alternatives to detention should be seriously considered before resorting to the detention of asylum-seekers."

The detention of asylum-seekers has long been a bone of contention for NGOs, particularly those working for human rights. A statement distributed at the EXCOM by the American NGO network InterAction (an ICVA member) points out that detention treats asylum-seekers like criminals, instead of respecting their right to seek asylum under the 1951 Refugee Convention. Often asylum-seekers are placed with common criminals for long periods of time.

The United States is viewed as the worst offender, in view of its resources and professed commitment to human rights, and reports from Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch have painted a grim picture of the conditions of asylum-seekers in detention. It is not helped by the fact that many local jails are run by private security firms – another example of the US government distancing itself from the issue.

The InterAction statement points out that those detained include children, women, torture victims, elderly, and individuals with serious medical conditions.

The question now is whether detained asylum-seekers will indeed be better off without any conclusion from UNHCR – the foremost body on refugee protection. Some will say yes, but others will see it as proof that the EXCOM drafting process has become completely politicised.

The lack of a conclusion on detention is particularly regrettable because several governments appeared willing to seriously consider alternatives to detention at the UNHCR Standing Committee in June.

*\*Issue #3 of Talk Back reported on the detention debate at the June session of the UNHCR Standing Committee.*

## ASYLUM-SEEKERS TARGETED BY MOSCOW POLICE IN BOMB BLAST ROUND-UP

517 persons, including asylum-seekers, had been deported from Moscow by September 28 as part of a massive security operation in the wake of the recent bomb blasts, according to Equilibre-Solidarity, a Moscow-based human rights organisation.

A recent report from Equilibre-Solidarity made available to Talk Back says that asylum-seekers in Moscow are being rounded up, evicted from apartments, and even sent off to unknown detention centres by security forces.

The bomb blasts, which the Moscow authorities allege are the work of Chechen rebels, have caused panic in Moscow and turned Muscovites against the city's 30,000 unregistered aliens, many of them asylum-seekers. According to Equilibre-Solidarity, everyone from outside the city – non-Muscovites or foreigners – is being told to register with the authorities. One in four of those previously registered is being rejected, rendering them liable to deportation.

Up to 300 Africans have been seeking assistance each day at the Refugee Reception Centre (RRC) in Moscow, which is funded and managed by UNHCR. Asylum-seekers in the centre have reportedly been beaten up by "local teenagers."

Even if asylum-seekers receive a certificate from the RRC, this is not necessarily recognised by the police. In order to get asylum from the Moscow Migration Service, the applicant also needs to prove residency under the system of "propiska."

But propiska has become much harder to obtain in the current climate of fear and xenophobia. Police are checking individual apartments and warning landlords not to rent out to persons without documents. According to the paper, sixteen asylum-seekers were told to leave at the insistence of the police in one night alone.

*\*Issue #4 of Talk Back was a special issue on refugee and migration issues in the CIS.*

## Partnerships Are Key

*continued from page 1*

Ladekarl cited several positive examples of partnerships between UNHCR and NGOs: PARinAC; the CIS Conference; the Protection Reach-Out process; and the inclusion of NGOs at UNHCR's Standing Committee.

"We are concerned that recent bilateral efforts by governments, as was seen during the Kosovo crisis, are hampering UNHCR's ability to protect and assist refugees. Such efforts are a serious obstruction to meaningful partnerships," said the statement.

Among other issues addressed by the statement were early-warning; access to asylum; security; standards-setting; statelessness; and internally displaced persons (IDPs).

*\* The full text of the statement can be found on the ICVA website: <[www.icva.ch](http://www.icva.ch)>*

### NGOs INVITED TO UNHCR'S 50<sup>TH</sup> BIRTHDAY PARTY

NGOs have been invited to participate in a series of events around December 14, marking the fiftieth anniversary of UNHCR's establishment by the UN General Assembly.

Addressing the Pre-EXCOM, Hans Thoolen, the Coordinator of UNHCR's 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary, said that the focus of the celebration will be on the contributions made by refugees. UNHCR plans to establish a \$50 million endowment fund for refugee education, he said.

No roundtables or conferences are foreseen. Instead, said Thoolen, a major TV broadcast will take place on December 14, covering visits to refugee camps and settlements and interviews. UNHCR will be producing a special 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary issue of its State of the World's Refugees report, and a "gallery of prominent refugees" on the UNHCR website <[www.unhcr.ch](http://www.unhcr.ch)>.

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## **UNHCR URGED TO INCREASE SUPPORT TO COLOMBIA'S DISPLACED AS CRISIS THREATENS TO DESTABILISE NEIGHBOURS**

As the crisis in Colombia begins to spill over to neighbouring countries, NGOs working in Colombia have called for UNHCR to adopt a more muscular approach towards Colombia's huge population of displaced persons, and also do more to work with NGOs.

According to a paper presented to the Pre-EXCOM by the Support Group for Organisations of the Displaced (GAD), which coordinates between thirteen Colombian human rights and refugee organisations, 1.5 million Colombians have been displaced by the war – making this indisputably the largest and most violent conflict in the Western hemisphere.

According to GAD, 48,000 have been uprooted this year. In one of many attacks, twenty-nine displaced were murdered by paramilitaries on August 21 at La Gabarra.

In another recent expression of concern, international NGOs working in Colombia last month warned the UN's Inter-Agency Standing Committee that Colombia's displaced are largely "unattended and unprotected," and called on UNHCR to take a much more direct role in their protection and assistance.

The statement was delivered to the Inter-Agency Standing Committee by the Norwegian Refugee Council, representing ICVA. The statement was written in consultation with DIAL, the NGO coordination group in Colombia whose members include Christian Aid, Oxfam Great Britain, Peace Brigades International, and Save the Children UK.

To judge from the comments of UNHCR officials to the Pre-EXCOM, UNHCR's main concern is that the war in Colombia is finally spilling over to neighbouring countries, provoking a grudging and even illegal response.

Some 4,000 Colombians fled into Venezuela this summer, but most were returned on the basis of an agreement between the two military authorities. Many NGOs consider this movement to have been coercive, and several Colombians are reported to have been killed on return. Smaller numbers have fled to Panama and Ecuador, but Panama has insisted that it will only give temporary asylum to Colombians on the condition that they are resettled elsewhere.

UNHCR is now trying to strengthen the asylum network around Colombia. The agency recently opened a liaison office in Quito, Ecuador.

But the NGOs are arguing that UNHCR should do much more to address the problem at the source – inside Colombia. The statement to the UN's IASC said that while the International Committee of the Red Cross is providing large amounts of emergency assistance to the displaced, UNHCR's "expertise and credibility" puts it in a unique position to strengthen community-based programmes and to seek durable solutions for the displaced. This call was again put to UNHCR during the NGO statement to EXCOM on October 6, 1999.

## **DEATH, DISEASE, AND DESPAIR AS ANGOLA SLIPS OFF THE INTERNATIONAL RADAR SCREEN**

Two million Angolans have been displaced by the latest fighting and another 200,000 have taken refuge in neighbouring countries, according to UNHCR.

There is a palpable sense of despair that Angola is once again the scene of the largest emergency in Africa – and seemingly resistant to any solution. Throughout the decade the UN has brokered peace agreements, held elections, and deployed peacekeepers, only to see agreements shattered. The latest round of fighting erupted this year in May, following the collapse of the Lusaka Peace Protocol.

As so often is the case with intractable crises, the mess has again been handed to relief agencies. Alain Peters, Director of UNHCR's Africa Bureau, told the Pre-EXCOM last week that they face tremendous difficulties because of insecurity and a lack of resources.

According to UNHCR, 70% of the aid does not reach those in need. Meanwhile, conditions of sanitation and levels of nutrition have deteriorated dramatically. Two hundred people are dying from hunger everyday.

The UN has launched several appeals this year. But, said Peters, the Angolan crisis receives little attention. Many compare this with the West's obsessive interest in Kosovo and see a double standard.

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## **DON'T ASK TIMORESE REFUGEES TO DECLARE RETURN INTENTIONS, SAY NGOs**

Relief agencies have asked UNHCR to ensure that Timorese refugees in West Timor are not requested to declare their intentions in a manner that exposes them to violence by armed militias. Once they have expressed a formal wish to return, say NGOs, they should

be immediately helped to return, perhaps via a corridor back to East Timor.

According to the International Catholic Migration Commission, an ICVA member that is working in the camps of West Timor, any questioning of the refugees will expose those who wish to return to reprisals from the militia who control the camps.

As long as the militias are armed and in control, it is unwise to make people declare, says the ICMC. It is unlikely to be "impartially ascertained, respected and fulfilled," as the High Commissioner suggested in her statement to EXCOM Monday.

Meanwhile, it is reported that UN officials in Jakarta announced the results of a survey of fifty refugee families Wednesday. 58% said they wanted to return to East Timor, 30% wanted to wait and see, and the remaining 12% expressed a desire to resettle elsewhere in Indonesia.

While much too small to justify any major conclusions, the survey results do suggest that most of the refugees in West Timor want to return and underscores the need to ensure their protection.

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## **UNHCR PLEDGES TO EVACUATE NGO PARTNERS, BUT REMAINS DEPENDENT ON UN SECURITY OFFICE**

UNHCR has reaffirmed its commitment to evacuate NGO staff members under contract, and agreed to ask the UN Security Office to formalise security arrangements with NGOs and draft a legal Memorandum of Understanding.

UNHCR security officials made the commitment at the Pre-EXCOM last week. At the same time, they pointed out that UNHCR is subordinate to the UN Security Office (UNSECOORD). They also said that NGOs  
*see page 7 "Dependent"*

## **Dependent On UNSECOORD**

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must show greater discipline in the field if they want to benefit from UN security.

UNHCR has established its own security unit and increased its security staff. This gives the agency greater flexibility in the field, and officials reconfirmed their policy of always evacuating NGO relief workers under contract to UNHCR in an emergency.

But they could give no such guarantees when it comes to local NGO employees, or refugees, who are often abandoned when the UN declares an emergency and hastily evacuates its own staff. Few things are as distressing as leaving behind co-workers, knowing that they may well be killed. This happened in Haiti (1993) and Rwanda (1994). Having worked for the UN often increases the threat of reprisals.

Many NGOs pride themselves on their willingness to ride out an emergency. They feel that UNSECOORD is far too timid in calling for an evacuation of UN staff. Some even want to go it alone.

But UNHCR officials feel that NGOs cannot have it both ways and expect to benefit from UN protection on their own terms. They also feel that some NGOs put themselves and others at risk by the cavalier manner in which they act in the field, deliberately inviting trouble.

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## **UNHCR AVOIDS PRIVATE SECTOR FUNDING DISCUSSION WITH NGOs**

UNHCR officials have declined an invitation from NGOs to discuss their ambitious plans to seek funds from the private sector.

The plans are contained in a July 1999 memorandum from Lowell Martin, former head of UNHCR's Evaluation Unit. It makes a strong push for exploiting the private sector more aggressively, on the grounds that government donations are increasingly

unreliable. Private donations to UNHCR are expected to exceed \$20 million this year alone.

"Staff engaged in UNHCR's more conventional government fundraising continue to raise warnings about the political vulnerability of international aid, and the dangers of over reliance on a limited number of traditional donors," says the memorandum.

The report was made available to Talk Back. UNHCR declined to respond when a question was raised at last week's Pre-EXCOM meeting with NGOs.

Private sector fundraising by UNHCR worries some NGOs because they fear it could result in them competing with UNHCR for the same money. Other NGOs say that they might find it harder to lobby with their governments for more UNHCR funding, if they thought that the agency was turning away from governments in favour of private corporations.

But UNHCR is clearly fascinated by the deep pockets of the private sector, particularly as its own budget is constantly on the brink of crisis.

The Martin memorandum points out that UNHCR gets tremendous media coverage, which is often side-by-side with "astounding reports of private wealth and giving." It argues for a full-blooded study to be undertaken by UNHCR.

Few would dispute that UNHCR's funding is still shaky, in spite of the adoption of a unified budget last year. The pre-EXCOM was told that this year UNHCR is asking \$934 million (excluding Timor). General programs are short by \$70 million. Special programs in the Horn of Africa and Great Lakes are also seriously short of money.

Africa needs more money, but perhaps not at the cost of greater conditionality. The United States has earmarked one-third of its UNHCR contribution (\$276 million) for Africa, reducing UNHCR's flexibility. This makes private funds even more appealing.

But NGOs feel that the proposal indicates a major change of strategy for UNHCR and in the interest of transparency, if nothing else, deserves a full and public debate.

## FEATURE ON KOSOVO

### NGOs URGED TO SHOW GREATER DISCIPLINE IN KOSOVO

International NGOs working in Kosovo will create confusion and undermine local civil society, if they do not show greater discipline and accept coordination.

This warning was delivered in strong terms at the ICVA General Assembly last weekend by several speakers with first-hand experience in the province. Meanwhile, it was announced that an ICVA representative will shortly leave for Kosovo to work with the Independent Council of International NGOs in Pristina for a period of six months.

NGOs have been pouring into Kosovo since June 12 when the Serbian forces withdrew. More than 150 are now working in the province – a huge number for a population of just over a million.

Unlike Bosnia, where UNHCR controlled the humanitarian purse strings, no single agency has a monopoly on funds in Kosovo. Indeed, money is flowing in from all directions. This fact, combined with the sheer number of organisations, makes it practically impossible to impose regulations.

"If NGOs don't want to be coordinated, no one can force them," said Patrick Daru of the Norwegian Refugee Council, who recently visited Kosovo on behalf of ICVA.

Some of the toughest criticism came from Anders Ladekarl, from the Danish Refugee Council. Ladekarl, who was re-elected as Chair of the new ICVA Executive Committee on Sunday, also visited Kosovo recently, and he came away with very mixed feelings about the work done by NGOs. "Let me be frank with you, not all of them were making things better," he said.

In one example, which he recounted to the ICVA Assembly, Ladekarl visited a small

village outside Peja and found one NGO providing housing material for returning refugees. When another NGO arrived on the scene offering a more sophisticated package of materials, the first NGO was asked to leave. Unfortunately, the villagers were not told that the newcomers only had money for seven of the 2,000 ruined houses.

"Such behaviour is damaging to the beneficiaries, it is damaging to our NGO community, and it is damaging to the trust that many donors and beneficiaries put in us. We need to put our own house in order to avoid such incidents."

This discussion on Kosovo followed a keynote address from Martin Griffiths, in which he called for greater discipline and professionalism among NGOs in humanitarian crises. For many, Kosovo has become a powerful argument for NGO regulations like the Sphere Project, the NGO Humanitarian Ombudsman, the Interaction guidelines for field cooperation, and the "people in aid project."

But for now, the immediate focus is on Kosovo and the ICVA Assembly clearly felt that NGOs there must do a better job of working together. Even the humanitarian programme – one of the most coherent components of the reconstruction plan – has been affected. The World Food Programme recently complained that it was not receiving comprehensive data on food distribution – an absolute basic in any relief operation.

For Patrick Daru, international NGOs also need to speak with one voice when lobbying the UN Mission in Kosovo (UNMIK). They should take a more forceful position on the protection of minorities and speak out against the way local authorities are being usurped by the Kosovo Liberation Army – something that could undermine elections.

Daru also called for a tougher NGO position on the way that individual NATO battalions

*see page 9 "Greater"*

## Greater Discipline Needed

*continued from page 8*

influence reconstruction in their sectors. In one example, the French battalion has arranged for a French company to rebuild the water system in Mitrovica.

Looking further ahead, all agree that the greatest long-term challenge is to strengthen Kosovar civil society. All too often, local civil society is weakened by international NGOs barging blindly into a war-torn society.

UNMIK will shortly be issuing a regulation on the registration of Kosovo NGOs that will allow them to receive funds directly. The main requirement will be non-profit status and a democratic structure.

The OSCE has responsibility for civil society under the UNMIK umbrella and Arne Piel Christensen, the Director of the OSCE Democratisation Department, was present at the ICVA Assembly.

Christensen – who has 30 years of NGO experience – said that registration would provide local NGOs with a certain independence. In addition, he said, the OSCE is encouraging Kosovar NGOs to establish their own organisation. An interim council exists with twelve members, but well over a hundred attend OSCE meetings.

The challenge lies in assisting Kosovar civil society to make the transition from clandestine opposition during the 1990s to outspoken non-partisanship in a modern democracy. This could involve them speaking out on behalf of beleaguered Serbs and challenging the KLA. The international community can make an important start by ensuring that joint projects are managed properly and transparently, said Daru.

*\*Issue #5 of Talk Back is a special report on Kosovo. See the ICVA website <[www.icva.ch](http://www.icva.ch)>.*

## US DISQUIET AT EXTENSION OF KOSOVO EVALUATION

The United States Government is said to be concerned that an independent evaluation of UNHCR's role in the Kosovo crisis has been broadened beyond UNHCR, to include "external actors."

Some NGOs hope that this signifies a willingness by the evaluators to tackle some of the more controversial actions by governments that greatly undermined UNHCR's protection role during the crisis. These would include the plethora of bilateral refugee camps and the humanitarian efforts of NATO, even as NATO bombs were adding to the misery inside Kosovo.

Fifteen evaluations of the Kosovo crisis are said to be under way – with three being done by NATO itself. But few are as eagerly awaited as the analysis of UNHCR's role. The agency was criticised for failing to anticipate the massive exodus of Kosovars in March, following the start of the NATO bombing.

The evaluation is being done by a group of independent experts, at UNHCR's expense. They have apparently decided that they cannot look at UNHCR in isolation. As a result, they have suggested a change in their terms of a reference, an extension of the deadline for reporting, and more funding.

As the Assistant High Commissioner Soren Jessen-Petersen explained to NGOs at the Pre-EXCOM, UNHCR has no objections. But the additional money will have to be raised from donors.

## **ROMA FLEEING KOSOVO FOR MACEDONIA AS ATTACKS ON MINORITIES INTENSIFY**

### **- UNHCR Special Envoy predicts "difficult winter" ahead**

4,000 Roma have fled persecution in Kosovo for the safety of Macedonia, underscoring the continuing threat to minorities in Kosovo.

Kosovo's minorities dominated an informal briefing at UNHCR's EXCOM in Geneva on Monday by Dennis McNamara, UNHCR Special Envoy in the Balkans and Director of the UNMIK humanitarian operations.

McNamara admitted that in spite of the presence of 45,000 KFOR soldiers, Kosovo's Roma and Serbs are very much at risk. Last week, a rocket was launched at a Serb market in the Pristina suburb of Kosovo Polje, representing an alarming escalation in violence.

But at least the Serbs have Serbia to which to go. The Roma are without a homeland and, as the pressure has mounted, they have taken increasingly desperate measures.

The threat to minorities in Kosovo was also underscored by NGOs during the pre-EXCOM debate. An ICMC representative said that the ICMC team in Kosovo had been "shocked" by what they found: "We expected difficulties - harassment, intimidation and discrimination. We were shocked, however, by the scale and scope of what we found. Serbs remaining in Kosovo were being murdered at a rate of four to five a day across the province....The morning after ICMC visited one elderly couple, they were found dead in their apartment."

McNamara said that in the hundred days since UNHCR returned to Kosovo, much has been achieved. In spite of this, his briefing was sombre and stressed the difficulties that lie ahead. "It's going to be a very difficult winter," he said.

After minorities, the second major task is to ensure shelter during the forthcoming winter,

he said. With 50,000 houses damaged and another 50,000 completely destroyed, 300,000 Kosovars are in need of housing.

There is no possibility of this need being met before next spring, said McNamara, although UNHCR is doing its best to distribute housing repair kits, identify host families, prepare community centres, and distribute winterised tents.

*see page 11 "Fleeing"*

### **ELECTRONIC ALARM BRACELETS TO BE USED TO PROTECT VULNERABLE SERBS**

UNHCR plans to use electronic bracelets to identify vulnerable members of minority groups, in a last-ditch effort to protect Kosovo's dwindling population of Serbs.

The number of Serbs in Kosovo has fallen below 30,000, from a pre-war Serb population of 220,000. Both KFOR and UNMIK are in a race against time to preserve the vestiges of multi-ethnicity. Many of the Serbs are elderly couples, afraid to leave their apartments.

Most have been identified and located by the British KFOR battalion, which oversees security in Pristina, but there is at present no way of knowing when they face intimidation or violence.

UNHCR has put out a tender for hundreds of electronic alarm bracelets of the type that are used by elderly people living alone. They can be activated by pressing a button, which sets off an alarm in a police station.

Precise details have still to be worked out, such as the wave-length to be used in Kosovo's crowded airwaves. It is not completely clear whether the bracelet would help if someone was attacked while away from home.

Bracelets have been used to register refugees in the past, but UNHCR officials says this would be their first use for protection.

## **Fleeing Attacks**

*continued from page 10*

UNHCR is sharing the housing program with USAID and ECHO, the European Commission Humanitarian Office. Together, they are trying to cover the needs of 78,000 houses before winter. UNHCR is confident of completing the 17,000 for which it has responsibility, but foresees major delays by its two partners.

One major obstacle, said McNamara, is the bottleneck at the Blace border crossing between Macedonia and Kosovo, which has become the principal entry point into the province. Some trucks wait for days before crossing. Given this, said McNamara, the humanitarian effort would depend heavily on NATO's "formidable" logistical capabilities during the forthcoming winter.

McNamara also noted that 240 persons in Kosovo had been wounded by landmines or unexploded ordnance: 44 of them fatally. Seventeen teams have been deployed to demine, and another thirteen to promote mine awareness.

40% of the injuries have been caused by cluster bombs and many humanitarian agencies are concerned that NATO troops are only demining military targets. McNamara conceded that this was an "ongoing" subject for debate. But, he welcomed the fact that NATO recently agreed to demarcate cluster bombs dropped by NATO during the war.

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## **Members' Page:**

### **CESEM (BOLIVIA)**

Rosario Sanchez was a fresh face at the recent ICVA General Assembly and the Pre-EXCOM meetings between UNHCR and NGOs. Sanchez is the director of the Centre for Studies and Special Services on Involuntary Migration (CESEM) in Bolivia, the newest member of the ICVA family.

CESEM's importance has grown in South America as the actual threat to refugees has diminished. It was established in La Paz,

Bolivia in 1983, at a time when Latin America was a turbulent continent, still struggling to come to terms with dictatorship.

Bolivia today is a very different country. The country has provided refuge to around four hundred refugees – from Cuba, Peru, Colombia, and Iran.

CESEM's task is to help refugees settle in their new country. It also represents UNHCR on the government eligibility committee that decides on refugee status. The problem with this, says Sanchez, is that the government changes every five years and is subject to political pressure - particularly from Peru, which constantly complains that Peruvian asylum-seekers are "terrorists." It is important that the committee be made independent and better able to resist such pressures, says Sanchez.

Like Bolivia, the entire Southern Cone bears little resemblance to the torrid region that it was in the early 1980s, when refugees fled in fear of their lives and were liable to be picked up by death squads. As a result of the reduction in tension and its financial crisis, UNHCR has drastically scaled back its deployment. Only one regional office now remains, in Buenos Aires, covering Argentina, Brazil, Bolivia, Paraguay, Uruguay, and Chile.

For those on the frontline, like Sanchez, this is totally inadequate. The problems facing refugees, she says, are not necessarily life and death. But they are certainly vital. Her own country, Bolivia, faces constant extradition demands from Peru. Kosovar Albanians and Bosnians who have resettled in Chile are finding it hard to adjust – particularly those from mixed marriages. Brazil still has a sizeable refugee population of 1,500.

More generally, says Sanchez, it is important for the international community to develop a strategy for strengthening local civil society, which will, in turn, strengthen the new democracies of Latin America. UNHCR would be well placed to capitalise on its experience with refugees – were it not withdrawing.

UNHCR's low profile has increased the importance of the PARinAC network and  
*see page 12 "CESEM"*

## **CESEM**

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CESEM has served as a PARinAC focal point for Latin America since 1997. Sanchez wrote this year's NGO statement on Latin America for Pre-EXCOM. Due to the Colombian crisis, a Colombian colleague delivered it.

As CESEM relies increasingly on networking – with UNHCR, PARinAC, and ICVA – so it does on communications. Sanchez strongly endorsed the new ICVA policy on information and its emphasis on e-mail, even though ICVA's publications are still produced in English because of limited funding. In June of this year she contacted UNHCR asking for documents on the Standing Committee, but received no answer. She had better luck with ICVA, which was able to refer her to the ICVA newsletter Talk Back (#3) and the ICVA website. Here Sanchez found several articles on the issues under discussion in Geneva. She translated them into Spanish and circulated them around the region. It was, she says, an example of the importance of information sharing to a global network, in the new information age.

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## **AFRICAN HUMANITARIAN ACTION (ETHIOPIA)**

**By Marguerite Garling**

African Humanitarian Action, AHA, was the brainchild of Dr. Dawit Zawde, a medical doctor and president of the Ethiopian Red Cross. His idea, prompted by a perceived shift of attention away from Africa as it lost its Cold War strategic significance, was to create an indigenous African humanitarian NGO staffed by medical professionals. This was a conscious attempt to show that Africans were capable of responding to their own humanitarian problems and, as such, was also intended as a boost to Africans' self-esteem, which had taken a plunge after years of debate about failure and pointing the finger of blame.

Now in its fifth year of action, AHA has its headquarters in Addis Ababa, with six staff and 36 professional staff in the field. The overall budget now stands at over \$2 million. Its operations in Angola, Burundi, Rwanda, and Uganda, involve upgrading hospitals and health centres and supplying essential drugs and medical materials to communities with little access to health services.

AHA remains present in Angola, despite having had to pull out of a successful project for returning refugees in Cazombo in UNITA-held territory. In Uganda, AHA runs 23 health centres for refugees in Adjumani district, catering to refugees and local Ugandans alike. Here, too, work has been hindered by insecurity and looting. In Rwanda, AHA stayed on in Gisenyi and Kibuye when many Northern NGOs had evacuated their staff. The organisation runs two hospitals in these districts, for refugees, returnees, and local survivors and anticipates an eventual phasing-out of its work as Rwandese medical staff resume control of their health facilities.

AHA is responding to the post-conflict needs of populations in Sierra Leone and Liberia. Exploratory missions have gone to both countries and health and rehabilitation needs have been identified. Once the necessary clearance and funding has been secured, AHA hopes to extend its work to these West African countries. In the meantime, AHA is providing medical services to displaced populations in Ethiopia's Afar and Tigray regions.

True to its African origins, AHA is looking to widen its funding base and obtain financial support, however nominal, from African governments. To date, African governments have proved reticent. AHA's main concern, as with most other Southern NGOs, is to have a better understanding of how to approach donors and where to find new donors as an alternative to UN or multilateral sources of support. Zawde believes that Northern NGOs could play a role in assisting their Southern counterparts to develop their skills and capacity in this crucial area of work.

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