



International Council of Voluntary Agencies
Conseil International des Agences Bénévoles
Consejo Internacional de Organizaciones Voluntarias

TALK BACK

The Newsletter of ICVA

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GETTING THE NORTH CAUCASUS BACK ON THE INTERNATIONAL AGENDA

The North Caucasus practically has dropped off the international agenda since the murder and kidnappings of a number of humanitarian workers of international agencies began several years ago. The result has been that the region remains a challenge for international organisations and humanitarian agencies as they attempt to reach those in need. Security concerns have made it too dangerous for international staff to be posted in the area. Humanitarian assistance is reliant on "remote control" operations that use local networks of NGOs and the Government to deliver assistance.

The North Caucasus combines a mixture of ethnic tensions, religious tensions, mafia prevalence, and an absence of rule of law. There are two possible scenarios foreseen by the international community for the development of the ongoing conflict. The first scenario is a drawn-out guerrilla war against the Russians in Chechnya. The second is that the conflict would spread to the other republics in the region -- republics that are already weakened by years of economic under-development.

A meeting convened in Geneva on 12 October tried to put the North Caucasus higher on the international agenda. International agencies, NGOs, and government representatives gathered to discuss the humanitarian and conflict situation in the region. During the afternoon session, OCHA wanted to coordinate on the priorities of international agencies and NGOs and to exchange strategies to deliver assistance. The meeting, an initiative of the CIS Conference NGO Working Group on Humanitarian Assistance (facilitated by the Norwegian Refugee Council) and FEWER (Forum on Early Warning and Early Response), was organised under the auspices of OCHA.

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DIFFERENCES IN VIEWS COME THROUGH AT NATO SEMINAR

NATO should not engage in humanitarian work, but should just provide logistical support to humanitarian agencies during crises. That was the message conveyed by certain NATO representatives at a one-day seminar in Brussels convened by NATO's Euro-Atlantic Partnership Council's (EAPC) Ad Hoc Group on Cooperation in Peacekeeping.

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TALK BACK

ICVA has been producing Talk Back over the last 7 months as part of its new proactive information strategy. Talk Back is distributed via e-mail and can also be found on the ICVA website: <www.icva.ch>.

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See page 2 for subscription information.

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EDITORIAL

How to reach the beneficiaries in regions that are off limits for humanitarian agencies and their staff? This question has again been put on top of the agenda of the humanitarian community, after the brutal murder of two officials of UNICEF and WFP in Burundi two weeks ago. It was also discussed at a recent inter-agency meeting on the North Caucasus held in Geneva.

In situations where there is no respect for humanitarian aid by the warring factions -- in fact, where the deliberate targeting of aid workers seems to have become a method of warfare -- the limits to what humanitarian organisations can do in order to bring relief, have become painfully clear. Aid organisations must continue calling on state actors to take their up responsibilities and to restore and ensure respect for the principles of humanitarian action. However, the debate should not end here.

An increasingly popular view holds that there are too many aid agencies in humanitarian emergencies. And, indeed, it is not easy to explain what the 300+ NGOs are doing in Kosovo. The discrepancy in the presence and interest of the aid community between Kosovo and, say, the North Caucasus where agencies are few and far between, is deeply worrying particularly as the needs are at least as urgent, if not more.

The security situation in the North Caucasus is so dangerous that some limited aid can only be provided through local partners. In Ingushetia, where there are more than 150,000 people who have been forcibly displaced by the Russian intervention in Chechnya, UNHCR hands its relief items to the government, asking them to bring it to the population in dire need. How much of this aid reaches them is unclear.

At the inter-agency meeting (reported on further in this issue of Talk Back), the World Health Organisation portrayed its operations in the region as a success story. 'Remote control' is the terminology the agency used for describing its operations that can exclusively be carried out by local partners.

Yet, it should be clear that this 'remote control' cannot be allowed to substitute for the hands-on involvement of international agencies. Without this involvement, local partners are doubly at risk.

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NATO Differences Over Humanitarian Assistance

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It remains questionable, however, whether there is consensus on this view within NATO.

The seminar was meant to test whether the views and experiences in the "Compendium on Humanitarian Aspects of Peacekeeping" were followed during the Kosovo crisis. The NATO Compendium, developed earlier this year following consultations with various governments and organisations, aims to identify ways of improving "the interaction and coordination among the diplomatic, political, military, and humanitarian and human rights actors undertaking or concerned with humanitarian assistance in peacekeeping." The seminar focussed on what NATO calls "theatres of operations" in the Kosovo crisis: the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia (FYROM), Albania, and Kosovo.

ICVA's representative at the meeting, Maarten te Kulve from Medecins sans Frontieres Holland, pointed out that the Compendium reads as a NATO document and will be interpreted as such by NGOs in the field. While the Chair objected, insisting that other organisations, including ICVA, had participated in the discussions over the Compendium, te Kulve reiterated that the end result was nonetheless a document in NATO language that would be perceived differently elsewhere.

The Compendium makes clear that the military's involvement in humanitarian operations should be in the form of a supporting role for humanitarian agencies and that these agencies should play the lead role. That message was reiterated by NATO representatives at the meeting. Lt. Col. Olsen, who was part of the KFOR operation, noted that KFOR was constantly pushing to get back to their military tasks and that they were pushing for humanitarian agencies to take over control of the camps. However, there was no clarification as to where that supporting role should end or what criteria the military uses when deciding if humanitarian agencies are ready to take over from the military -- a problem that arose in many camps in FYROM where the military judged humanitarian agencies as not being ready to take over camp management.

While Operation Allied Harbour in Albania has been referred to as a humanitarian operation, Lt. Col. Kaduck, who was part of the AFOR

operation, noted that the military's work in Albania merely involved regular military tasks. AFOR provided logistical support for the humanitarian agencies on the ground. The only difference was that the orders were coming from another authority.

Neill Wright, Deputy Coordinator of UNHCR's South-eastern Europe Operation, asked governments if they wanted their militaries to have the permanent job of providing humanitarian assistance. If they do not want the militaries to take on such a role, there is a need for adequate resources to be provided to the international agencies so that they can properly respond to humanitarian crises.

One of the major lessons that Lt. Col. Olsen pointed to is the need for common standards to be established during the coordination phase to avoid disparities in the quality of the camps or the assistance being provided, as happened in the camps in Albania.

What became clear during the meeting is that there is a lack of consensus within NATO as to what is exactly meant by Civil-Military Cooperation (CIMIC), a term used by the military to describe relations with civilian institutions, including humanitarian agencies. A high-level representative defined CIMIC as providing a "combat support function," but also noted it has become the "sexiest term in this business."

One other example of the huge differences in thinking and language between the military and NGOs was illustrated by the US representative's suggestion that international agencies and NGOs should adopt a structure similar to the military's in the form of an "instant command structure" -- a funnel of sorts so that requests are not duplicated. Having such a structure is "what makes the military efficient," implying that NGOs should follow the military's lead.

There was also recognition by NATO that there are significant differences in the cultures of the military, international organisations, and NGOs. Many in NATO feel that there is a need to develop relations and contacts between military and civilian actors before the outbreak of conflicts.

The Chairman will draw up a report based on the seminar to be distributed to the participants suggesting some next steps. ♦

The North Caucasus on the International Agenda

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Five representatives from the FEWER network and experts in the field were invited to the meeting by NRC (an ICVA member) and FEWER to discuss the situation on the ground (refer to the FEWER reports <www.fewer.org>). Their comments seemed somewhat restrained by the presence of the Deputy Minister of Nationalities for the Russian Federation, who was also invited to make a presentation and reminded participants that the "so-called Chechen crisis" is an internal affair. This view makes it difficult for NGOs and international agencies since the Government is wary of allowing an international presence into the region, which it considers a battleground against terrorism.

The Centre for Peacemaking and Community Development (CPCD), Medecins du Monde, Non-Violence International, and UNHCR are among organisations that are using "remote control" or "remote coordination" to deliver assistance. UNHCR provides assistance in Ingushetia and Dagestan through the government. Two local UNHCR staff accompany the deliveries and report back to UNHCR in Stavropol. There are, however, limits to such remote coordination programmes: a lack of international presence, which puts limits on the ability to provide protection and impartial assistance; increased pressure is put on local partners; and there are constraints as to the size of programmes that can be operated. Innovative solutions have been found, such as the video-taping of distribution (UNHCR) and cross-checking by local monitors of those delivering the assistance.

At the same time, there is a need for extensive and reliable networks to ensure that remote coordination programmes can work effectively. Since the Chechen conflict from 1994-1996, not enough has been done to assist the development of civil society networks or NGOs. However, there was consensus at the meeting (in the afternoon session, international agencies and NGOs had a more detailed discussion) that assistance should not be just emergency-based, but should include programmes on conflict-resolution, conflict-prevention, development, and early-warning systems.

The absence of lessons learned from remote coordination programmes is being used as an

excuse for donors to take a stand-by-and-see approach. The \$500,000 in assistance that has been delivered by UNHCR since August has come out of its Emergency Fund. There has been a lack of funding from governments for the North Caucasus. OCHA needs to come up with a comprehensive appeal that reflects the activities that can be implemented.

OCHA is looking into sending an inter-agency assessment mission to the North Caucasus. A representative of UN Emergency Relief Coordinator Sergio Viera de Mello has been sent to Moscow and has been discussing the possibilities of launching such an assessment mission with the Prime Minister's Office and other ministries. The mission hinges on the good-will of the Russian Government and on the security situation as some agencies are still not prepared to engage in cross-border operations. The representative has also been talking to NGOs in Moscow as to the possibility of including them in the assessment team.

Latest Developments

Since the meeting, Talk Back has come across the following information regarding some of the latest developments in the region

- The International Peace Bureau and CPCD are calling on NGOs to urge the International Monetary Fund to make loan instalments to the Russian Federation conditional upon military action; to influence Russia to open its borders to allow displaced people to escape the bombing; and to encourage the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) to take a strong stand in protecting human rights in the region.

- International human rights organisations, including Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch, have started to look into ways they can have a presence in the region and interview refugees.

- International Alert is organising a meeting to be held in Sochi for NGOs and international organisations to come up with a comprehensive plan for conflict prevention work in Karachai-Chekes. The Working Group on Conflict Management and Prevention will also have an expanded meeting in Moscow, November 24-28. Contact Gevork Ter-Gabrielian, International Alert <gtergabrielian@international-alert.org>. ♦

PROFILE: CPCD — WORKING THROUGH REMOTE COORDINATION

The Centre for Peacemaking and Community Development (CPCD), established in 1995, has official NGO status in Chechnya and Britain, with additional offices in Moscow, Nazran, Nalchik and Novgorod). CPCD's work in Russia and particularly the North Caucasus region focuses on supporting and encouraging local capacities for peace. Projects are jointly implemented with local groups and individuals in the fields of human rights, peacemaking, non-violence, community development and humanitarian assistance. The CPCD also offers training in these fields and works to link local NGOs with partners elsewhere to strengthen their work and reduce their isolation.

CPCD's activities in the North Caucasus include: psychological rehabilitation for children; community development through the restoration of cultural and sports activities, the development of educational programmes, training in conflict resolution, human rights, and stress relief; the setting up of a grain mill for the distribution of flour to displaced persons; the distribution of educational and recreational materials to vulnerable children; reconstruction work on hospitals and health rehabilitation centres; the distribution of relief materials; and the setting up of a Chechen branch of the International Campaign to Ban Landmines.

CPCD offices in Nazran and Grozny have close contact with the local authorities in the two republics. The main authorities in Ingushetia dealing with the IDP crisis are the Emergencies Ministry and the Federal Migration Service. Both structures are offering the CPCD full cooperation and information about the numbers of IDPs and the provisions already provided. Chechen authorities are also, on the whole, cooperative in their approach to CPCD's work in the republic.

Medecins du Monde and the Agency for Rehabilitation and Development are currently working in Chechnya and Ingushetia. Action Contre La Faim and Medecins sans Frontieres Belgium and Holland are assessing whether it is possible for them to begin a programme in the area. There are good relations between the NGOs working or considering working in the region, and regular coordination meetings

take place in Moscow, in which CPCD participates.

Organisations that have continued working in the region through remote coordination over the last few years are in a better position to continue and increase their operations during the present crisis. The knowledge and experience of the local staff and trust between local staff and foreign representatives of the international organisations are essential components for remote coordination-style work.

Local CPCD representatives travel monthly to Moscow to report on activities and to coordinate further their work with international representatives in Moscow. Photo and video material is used to illustrate the work being conducted, in addition to written and oral reports.

Such a system of working may not allow large-scale programmes to be developed, as local staff may also be targeted if known to be handling very large sums of money, and donors may be concerned about monitoring. However, small to medium-sized programmes can and have been successfully implemented through this method. CPCD believes that it is important to do what is possible in the light of the suffering and hardship brought about by the present war. ♦

Editorial

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In their statement to the recently held UNHCR Executive Committee, the NGOs stated that "where, for security reasons, UNHCR, international organisations and international NGOs do not have access, they could work through local NGOs. But the statement immediately noted that "where there is no international presence to act as eyes and ears, refugees and internally displaced are in the most critical situations."

The protection of refugees and displaced persons requires an international presence on the ground and should be pushed for at the highest levels of government. To rest in complacency over insecurity, or worse, to follow the money available for Kosovo, is not good enough for any humanitarian organisation. ♦

*Ed Schenkenberg van Mierop,
ICVA Coordinator*

STABILITY PACT HAS TROUBLE INVOLVING NGOs

It will be up to NGOs to ensure that they are part of the work and deliberations of the Southeast Europe Stability Pact. While there was general agreement by the members of the Working Table on Democratisation and Human Rights that NGOs have an important role to play in the framework of the Stability Pact, it seems that the Pact is having trouble actually bringing NGOs into the process.

The Southeast Europe Stability Pact was established on June 10 in Cologne under the European Union's German Presidency. It aims to strengthen countries in Southeastern Europe "in their efforts to foster peace, democracy, respect for human rights and economic prosperity, in order to achieve stability in the whole region". The Pact involves all major international actors playing a role in the region, the European Union and other Western governments. Three working tables were created at a later date during a meeting in Sarajevo: Democratisation and Human Rights; Economic Reconstruction, Development, and Cooperation; and Security Issues. Each working table is to develop its own work plan in conformity with the objectives of the Pact.

The Working Table on Democratisation and Human Rights met in Geneva 18-19 October. At an information meeting for NGOs organised by the Swiss Federal Department of Foreign Affairs on the 18th, it was clear that the Working Table's work is still under definition and that it is still trying struggling to find the best way to operate.

The Working Table decided to set up a series of task forces to look into various issues, including gender and the media. The task forces are to report back to the Working Table at a meeting in Budapest in January (Hungary is the current co-chair) at which time a definite work programme will be adopted. The Chair of the Working Table, Max van der Stoep (OSCE High Commissioner on National Minorities) and the Deputy Special Coordinator, Donald Kursch, both made it known that there are limited resources available for the Working Table's offices. At the same time, they encouraged NGOs to send in their ideas, but warned that they might not get a response right away due to limited resources.

One idea that the Table has of involving NGOs is to have a meeting with NGOs during the OSCE Summit in mid-November since the Table members assume that several NGOs will be at the Summit.

see page 7 "NGOs"

ICVA SENDS STAFF TO WORK WITH THE NGOs IN KOSOVO

On 1 November an ICVA seconded Information Officer will start with the NGO Council in Kosovo. The NGO Council, of which Mercy Corps, MSF and Oxfam are some of the most prominent members, has become a dynamic force in bringing NGO concerns to the attention of the international community. The information officers' job will be to provide the Council with the necessary support to facilitate the flow of information between the NGOs and to assist the Council in taking joint positions.

The NGO Council was formed in January 1999 in an effort to facilitate joint advocacy actions of the some 20 international NGOs working in Kosovo at the time. It continued to operate in Macedonia during the refugee crisis. After returning to Kosovo, the Council has tried to expand its work and to include more NGOs. However, one constraint is that its members have been fully occupied with their own operations, whereas developing a debate among the NGO community and defining joint positions requires much time and extra resources.

At present, the number of NGOs working in Kosovo has increased to more than 300. Among these are huge differences in terms of quality norms and effectiveness of their work, as reported in Talk Back Issue 1, #7. After Rwanda, the aid community may be again under severe criticism from donors and the media.

While there are probably not many volunteers in the NGO community who want to burn their fingers on the issue of the quality of NGOs, it seems at least that it requires an internal reflection on the part of the larger NGOs. The Information Officer could initiate this debate as just one of his challenging tasks ahead.

NGOs and the Stability Pact

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When the question was raised as to whether NGOs would be invited to join the task forces, the response was somewhat cryptic. Van der Stoel responded that they did not want the task forces to be too large or cumbersome, but that there was a willingness to invite NGOs to the task forces who come forward with proposals. There seems to be a lack of a real plan on how to involve NGOs in the process.

It seems that NGOs will have to take the initiative to ensure that they are involved in the work and deliberations of the Working Table and its task forces. While the will is there on the part of the Table's members to include NGOs, it seems that the limited resources may hamper a real out-reach to NGOs. NGOs have the experience of working in the region that could help the Working Table achieve its objectives. NGOs interested in participating in the work of the Working Table or task forces should contact Donald Kursch, Deputy Special Coordinator, Tel: +32(2) 234.7114; Fax: +32(2)234.7105. ♦

GENERAL ASSEMBLY OF RED CROSS AND RED CRESCENT SOCIETIES OPENS IN GENEVA

The International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent societies' General Assembly opened Saturday 23 October in Geneva, a week before the opening of the International Conference of the Red Cross and Red Crescent, which takes place once every four years. One hundred and thirty-two national societies of 176 are represented at the Assembly, which will last until the 28th.

The Assembly appointed Mr. Didier Cherpitel as its new Secretary-General on the first day. Cherpitel was, admittedly, not a traditional candidate as he has no experience in the Red Cross, Red Crescent or in any other humanitarian organisations. However, his interest in humanitarian issues, combined with his experience in international banking and his desire to focus on turning the Federation into a better service organisation for the National Societies and vulnerable people, prompted the IFRC's Executive Committee to recommend him for the post.

IFRC President Astrid Heiberg challenged those participating in the Assembly to discuss how they, as the IFRC and National Societies could do better work. A new draft strategy -- Strategy 2010 -- is before the Assembly. Representatives will be asked to adopt a new constitution, a new plan, and a new budget -- all of which would help to make the Federation more transparent and accountable. Such transparency, she noted, is necessary to show that the Federation is a responsible organisation, especially given the increase in the number of humanitarian agencies and the growing criticism from the media over the delivery of humanitarian assistance, and also for the benefit of donors.

In his speech to the General Assembly, the President of the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), Cornelio Sommaruga, made a rather off-handed comment with reference to this year's Nobel Peace Prize laureate Medecins sans Frontieres. While saying he was happy for MSF, the ICRC chief said that when he had heard the news of MSF winning the reward, he had remembered a quote: "Silence alone is great, all the rest is weakness."

This quote could be interpreted as referring to the different policies of the ICRC and MSF regarding their 'temoignage' (witnessing) policies. MSF started as an off-shoot from the Red Cross after the events in Biafra (Nigeria) at the end of the sixties. Five French doctors working for the Red Cross decided that the organisation's policy of silent diplomacy -- working behind the scenes in order to achieve access, while maintaining strict confidentiality - - was no longer the only method of carrying out effective humanitarian action. They chose to speak out in front of the television cameras about the atrocities they had witnessed and based their work on the claim that no government has the right to deny aid to its citizens when they are in need. Ever since, the witnessing role (temoignage in French) has been central to MSF's mission. ♦

Issue of the Month: ICVA IN THE FIELD

At its recently held General Assembly, it was discussed how ICVA could support NGO field-based cooperation structures. Whereas the 'old' ICVA has been accused of 'parachuting' coordination structures from Geneva into the field, the ICVA structures in Guatemala and the former Yugoslavia provide interesting examples of how ICVA has facilitated and supported the operations of international and local NGOs and has brought them together. At the same time, ICVA's presence in Geneva has given these structures a unique opportunity to reach the highest policy-making levels. Only upon the request of its members and partners, will ICVA continue supporting field-based cooperation initiatives and lend its name to NGO consortia in the future.

GUATEMALA ICVA'S EXPERIENCE IN CLOSING THE GUATEMALAN REFUGEE CHAPTER

In July 1999, the UN High Commissioner for Refugees and the Presidents of Mexico and Guatemala attended an official ceremony, which marked the end of the repatriation programme for Guatemalan refugees. It closed the book on a story of a refugee population that had been uprooted in the mid-seventies when the Guatemalan army stepped up its campaign of murder and violence against the population. Since 1992, 42,000 refugees have returned to Guatemala and some 22,000 other people have locally integrated in Mexico.

UNHCR has described this operation as a success: not only because of the substantial proportion of Guatemalan refugees who were given the possibility to stay in Mexico, but also because this process was largely facilitated by an efficient partnership in the field involving UN agencies, governments, NGOs, including ICVA. At the last UNHCR Executive Committee, Mrs Ogata paid tribute to the work of NGOs in contributing to the operations and described it as "a truly exemplary case of partnership in protection".

The ICVA structure in Guatemala, set up in June 1992 from Geneva, was involved in the final stages of the agreement defining the conditions of return to Guatemala, signed between the Guatemalan government and the representatives of the refugees in October 1992. The agreement formally recognised the International Group for Advice and Accompaniment of the Return (GRICAR), a group formed by the Embassies of Canada, Mexico, France and Sweden, the World Council of Churches, and ICVA. The group

accompanied the refugees on their return, participated in the negotiation process, and monitored the implementation of the agreement.

Simultaneously, a Reference Group of ICVA-members was formed to maintain close links between the NGOs working in the field and those analysing the situation from a policy perspective.

This Reference Group decided to continue independently in 1997, when the lines with Geneva were cut due to ICVA's near collapse. It took up the tasks previously carried out by the Geneva-based Secretariat, including representing ICVA in the GRICAR group, raised funds, and attended the negotiations on the return process. The Reference Group managed to rally several local NGOs around a common interest and clear objectives.

With the closure of the refugee programme, the ICVA/GRICAR structure will also cease to exist. At present, Beate Thoresen, who has represented ICVA in GRICAR, is systematically drawing up the experiences. She describes the ICVA role in Central America as a "useful umbrella for NGOs who were working with the refugees in the region."

A future role for ICVA in supporting field structures, Beate Thoresen suggests, could involve setting "some minimum standards for communication, facilitating the flow of information throughout the network and with other institutions at the international level." ♦

BOSNIA ICVA ASSISTS POST-WAR RECONSTRUCTION IN BOSNIA

ICVA offers a range of different services to non-governmental organisations in Bosnia, without trying to impose coordination, according to Nick Scott-Flynn, Director of ICVA-Bosnia.

In speaking to the ICVA General Assembly on 1 and 2 October, Scott-Flynn agreed that the potential for confusion and competition is certainly great, given the variety and number of actors trying to rebuild Bosnia -- between 500 and 1,000 local NGOs and well over 100 international NGOs. In addition, he said, no fewer than forty-one nationalities make up NATO's Stabilisation Force (SFOR).

But, said Scott-Flynn, ICVA's approach is to identify useful services, instead of trying to impose coordination on this large and unwieldy contingent. ICVA's single most popular product is probably the directory of NGOs, which has a circulation of 3,000 and has been regularly updated.

In addition, ICVA produces guides on taxation, offers advice on NGO registration, provides information on the return of refugees, offers a catalogue on donor activities, disseminates information on other organisations, and produces an NGO newsletter.

ICVA also lobbies on behalf of NGOs that have problems with international agencies, but are reluctant to complain openly. Scott-Flynn cited the European Union, which funds many NGOs but is often late in making payments.

ICVA set up a field presence in the Balkans in 1993, when it opened an office in Zagreb to support NGOs working with UNHCR on Bosnian refugees. The office moved to Bosnia after the signing of the Dayton agreement in September 1995. It now employs eleven staff members in the region, two of them internationals.

With the near-demise of ICVA in Geneva in 1997, ICVA in Bosnia became virtually independent. In 1998 it set up a sub-office in Belgrade, which has played a significant role in offering support to NGOs in Serbia. The NGO network in the region will be further enhanced when an ICVA secondee starts

working with the NGO Council in Pristina, Kosovo.

Scott-Flynn stressed that ICVA-Bosnia also liaises with regional coalitions like the European Council on Refugees and Exiles (ECRE) and international bodies outside Bosnia. ICVA recently persuaded international NGOs to fund a Bosnian group to make a presentation at a World Bank meeting on Bosnian reconstruction, which took place in Brussels. Scott-Flynn remarked that "ICVA's revival in Geneva provides welcome support and a point of entry to the Geneva system. We feel rather like the prodigal son returning to the fold," he told the Assembly.

Overshadowing all, however, is the fact that the Dayton Agreement has still not succeeded in rebuilding a reintegrated Bosnia. This, said Scott-Flynn, is the ultimate goal of everyone working in Bosnia. But, he said, there was a "test of wills" between Bosnian politicians -- many of whom espouse nationalist platforms -- and the international community. "Without continued international pressure, the politicians will happily revert to their bad old ways."

It is easy to confuse successful support for international NGOs with the success of this larger mission. In addition, said Scott-Flynn, Bosnian civil society remains extremely fragile, even if the numbers of local NGOs are extremely impressive.

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PROFILE: CORRIDOR TO VICTIMS OF THE BOSNIAN WAR

Zineta Rasavac, a sociologist from Sarajevo, attended UNHCR's Pre-EXCOM discussions on behalf of Corridor, an organisation that has been providing psycho-social support for victims of war trauma in Bosnia since the siege of Sarajevo.

Four years after the Dayton Agreement, says Rasavac, there is still a need for trauma counselling in Bosnia.

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Corridor

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First, there are victims of rape and violence during the actual war. Their pain hardly diminishes with the passage of time, and may even grow in time. Rasavac's own daughter was wounded during a bombing while working as an Associated Press reporter in the war: she still cannot tolerate any sharp sounds.

Then there are the casualties of the current Bosnian impasse. Over a million Bosnians are still displaced from their homes and only a trickle of refugees from minority areas have been able to return.

Even those that return face difficulties: 2,500 families have gone home since February 1999, but UNHCR has been unable to provide them with materials to repair their houses. Jacques Mouchet, UNHCR's Coordinator for South-eastern Europe Operation, conceded during UNHCR's Pre-EXCOM that this would "undoubtedly discourage others who are considering return."

The continuing displacement adds to the trauma of Bosnians that have yet to recover from a devastating war. Like many groups offering psycho-social help, Corridor still relies on the same formula used in the siege of Sarajevo, under which group counselling is offered at community centres for a period of up to three months. Those who so wish can continue on their own. Severely disturbed people are offered medical assistance.

Rasavac intervened in the discussion at Pre-EXCOM to ask UNHCR to put more resources into strengthening Bosnian NGOs, and less into its international NGO partners. She cited the Bosnian Women's Initiative, which spends US funds on a wide range of local Bosnian initiatives.

But, said Rasavac, UNHCR relies on a group of eight large INGOs to subcontract out to Bosnians. The result is that INGOs spend most of the money on their well-paid international staff, while Bosnians do most of the work.

In one recent example, UNHCR asked the Save the Children Fund to provide psycho-social care for Kosovar refugees who flooded into Bosnia and were being housed in collective centres. SCF asked Corridor to implement the program for US\$10,000. "We said, forget it," said Rasavac.

In the first place, she said, the refugees were only planning to stay a short time. Second, UNHCR had not thought through the language difficulties. But the main feeling was that after working with trauma for several years, Corridor should have won enough trust from UNHCR to be approached directly. It was, says Rasavac, typical of the misapprehension surrounding the notion of "local capacity building."

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PROFILE: JOB 22 PROVIDES LEGAL ADVICE

Job 22 is a prime example of an inspired initiative by an inspired and impatient individual that has grown by leaps and bounds.

Named after the Biblical Book of Job, whose name is synonymous with uphill struggle, the organisation has been offering legal support for Bosnians since 1994. It was established by Zdravka Grebojevtic, a Bosnian High Court judge who frankly admits that she was losing her sanity during the siege. "The best cure was to help others," she says.

Initially, Job 22 concentrated on the legal complications arising from the collapse of the Yugoslav legal system that nonetheless still applied throughout the former Yugoslavia in some important respects. One example was the disposal of "social property" -- partially owned by the state and tenants. This caused endless problems as former owners moved away.

With the end of the war in Bosnia, Job 22 has evolved into a valued partner of the international community. Every month it presents two important legal issues to the Office of the High Representative in Bosnia. One major current problem lies in ensuring that Bosnians with joint nationality (e.g. Bosnian-Canadians) receive reciprocal rights in both entities of Bosnia, as well as the second country.

In addition to providing a broad spectrum of legal advice to refugees and displaced, Job 22

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Job 22

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has also taken on the task of analysing the legal advice given by UNHCR's NGO partners to their clients -- and trying to ensure that it is consistent and useful.

This is not easy says Grebojevtic. Refugees, displaced, and NGOs alike have to find their way through a thicket of complex laws on property rights, nationality, and registration. Even when they think they have it under control, they face obstruction from nationalist politicians determined to block the return to a multiethnic society.

The international community has provided three separate means of appeal. First, there are the three ombudspersons that rule on disputes in the Bosniak-Croat Federation. Secondly, Gret Haller from Switzerland acts as Ombudsperson for the whole of Bosnia. Finally, the Dayton Agreement set up a constitutional court, which has the final say in all disputes.

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SERBIA ICVA IN SERBIA PREPARES FOR ACCELERATION OF RELIEF AID

After staying open throughout the NATO bombing, ICVA-Belgrade is gearing up for an influx of relief agencies working on the growing humanitarian crisis in Serbia.

ICVA's office in Belgrade opened in September 1998 as an offshoot of ICVA-Bosnia. It stayed open during the NATO bombing, offering a meeting place for Serbian employees of foreign relief agencies that left Serbia as soon as the NATO campaign began.

"Many (Serbian employees) felt bitter and abandoned," said one observer. "There's lots of healing going on within these agencies."

The end of the war in Serbia, and Serbia's growing humanitarian needs, have presented ICVA with important new responsibilities.

In August, the ICVA family sponsored a meeting in Geneva for NGOs interested in the crisis in Serbia. This meeting concluded that the security risks of working in Serbia were minimal. It also allowed CARE International to state clearly that the detention of three CARE officials in Serbia should not prevent NGOs from providing humanitarian assistance.

The Serbian government is appealing for humanitarian assistance while making it clear that international NGOs will be kept on a very tight rein. In addition, there is continuing distrust over the detention of Branko Jelen from CARE International.

ICVA is well-placed to play a mediating role, and some hope it can exploit the respect gained during the NATO bombing to help repair the relationship between the government and international NGOs.

ICVA-Belgrade is working on a wide range of activities that would make life easier for the relief agencies: a draft law on NGO registration; conditions of work; radio frequencies; and licence plates. It is also reminding NGOs to respect Yugoslav law -- and that working in Serbia carries responsibilities.

The number of international NGOs in Serbia is far below that of Kosovo or Bosnia and the government is determined to keep them under control.

Nonetheless, with the growing humanitarian needs, ICVA is receiving inquiries from an entirely new group of relief agencies, from countries such as Russia, Greece, and Poland. Such an influx could bring NGOs that are keen to help, but many may lack the knowledge and experience necessary for undertaking humanitarian action under complex circumstances.

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UNHCR'S EXCOM FOLLOW-UP

UNHCR OPENS UP ITS EVALUATION REPORTS TO PUBLIC SCRUTINY, INVITES NGOS' PARTICIPATION IN EVALUATION MISSIONS

In a move that is certain to attract the support and interest of its NGO partners, UNHCR has decided to declassify evaluation reports going back to 1996 and to establish a roster of independent consultants to participate in future evaluation missions.

These were among several decisions announced by Assistant High Commissioner Soren Jessen-Petersen at the recent EXCOM meeting. It follows an independent review of UNHCR's evaluation function, sponsored by Canada.

UNHCR's evaluation unit has traditionally been among the least transparent and effective in the agency -- extraordinary though this was for an organisation that is constantly dealing with unforeseen emergencies.

Without exception, evaluation reports focussed on UNHCR's performance in past events, waited until the crisis was past, and then went into UNHCR's deep bureaucratic hole. No one ever knew whether they helped UNHCR prepare better for future emergencies. The assumption was they did not, given the number of times that UNHCR has been caught short -- most recently in Kosovo.

This appears to be changing fast, judging from Jessen-Petersen's remarks:

* Reorganisation. A new Evaluation and Policy Analysis Unit will be headed by Jeff Crisp (who worked at the British Refugee Council before joining UNHCR) and placed directly under Soren-Petersen. This unit will combine the functions of evaluation and policy, thus assuring that the lessons from the past quickly reach the highest levels of decision-making at UNHCR.

* Transparency. All reports produced by the old inspection and evaluation service going back to 1996 will be declassified and made available in hard copy and on a new website.

(It is not known why 1996 was selected as the cut-off.)

* Independence. UNHCR will establish a new roster of consultants and consultancy companies with proven expertise in humanitarian assistance, to help with future evaluations. Jobs will be put out to tender. Several studies have already been produced and are available on request from UNHCR.

* Participation. Jessen-Petersen expressed the hope that NGOs and EXCOM members would participate in joint evaluation missions with UNHCR. Peta Sanidson, an Oxfam staff member, is currently a member of the independent team for the Kosovo evaluation.

* Performance. The goal of the new policy will be to improve UNHCR's future performance, not to produce historical documents.

All this will inject a breath of fresh air into UNHCR. At the same time, UNHCR officials caution that much remains to be done. Evaluation is not the only oversight mechanism available to UNHCR, said Jessen-Petersen. Nor is it simply an oversight function. Rather, "it contributes to institutional learning and the process of policy development," said Jessen-Petersen.

Although Jessen-Petersen did not say it in so many words, the new evaluation policy will require a profound change of attitude among UNHCR officials, from the very top to the very bottom. Such a change will mean listening to critics and even inviting criticism, on the clear understanding that this only strengthens UNHCR's capacity to respond to the next crisis. This has been one of UNHCR's greatest weaknesses, and the source of despair to its many friends, over the past decade.

* For details of the new policy and information on evaluation reports contact Jeff Crisp: e-mail crisp@unhcr.ch. ♦

CORRECTION ON UNHCR'S KOSOVO EVALUATION

In Talk Back Volume 1, #7, the piece entitled "US Disquiet at Extension of Kosovo Evaluation" incorrectly reported that the Kosovo evaluation team had requested an expansion in their terms of reference. It stated that, "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.'" Jeff Crisp, Head of the Evaluation and Policy Analysis Unit at UNHCR, brought to Talk Back's attention the fact that external actors have been part of the evaluation since the beginning: "...the Terms of Reference say: 'While the evaluation will be focused on the activities and performance of UNHCR, the review will also consider the role and impact of other actors involved in the crisis, to the extent and insofar as they affected UNHCR's operations.'" [The Terms of Reference are available from the ICVA Secretariat.] ♦

CLARIFICATION FROM JOHN HOREKENS, UNHCR ON PRIVATE SECTOR FUNDING

One piece in Talk Back Volume 1, #7 entitled "UNHCR Avoids Private Sector Funding Discussion with NGOs," reported on the meeting with the UNHCR Division of Communication and Information. Its chief, John Horekens, has written back to Talk Back. Below is part of his letter.

"I am surprised by the inadequate reporting of the exchange that took place at the Pre-EXCOM meeting with NGOs on 1 October 1999. The issue of UNHCR's plans for private sector fund raising was indeed raised; I certainly did not avoid it in my comments.

"As I stated at the meeting, we are currently conducting an in-depth appraisal of UNHCR's experience and potential in private sector fund raising, and I cannot presume the outcome of this evaluation. As your article states, this work is being conducted by Mr. Lowell Martin, who will submit his conclusions to me before the end of the year, for review by the senior management. It would be premature to draw conclusions at this point but I pointed out in our meeting on 1 October that UNHCR has an

interest in engaging itself more, and hopefully in novel ways, in the private and corporate sectors. I also added that, after reviewing the appraisal with senior management, we will share conclusions with our partners, including NGOs.

"Whatever the outcome, I have to repeat, for the benefit of the readers [of Talk Back] who were not at the Pre-EXCOM Consultations, that UNHCR is not going through a major strategy shift in relation to its funding mechanism, and that we continue to count on financial support remaining the main responsibility of governments.

"The item dedicated to information on UNHCR funding was included in the agenda of the Pre-EXCOM meeting with the NGO community in a spirit of transparency and openness. In that sense, I was and remain prepared to answer all questions, including the more delicate ones. Talk Back's account is, disappointingly, not correct....My colleagues and I are available to discuss this subject further with ICVA and NGOs."

[Note from the editor:

The letter from the UNHCR Director of Communication and Information reflects his comments on the plans of private sector fundraising made at the Pre-EXCOM meeting. However, at that meeting the Director did not respond to a question raised as to whether UNHCR agrees to the conclusion made in the (draft) PARinAC review report circulated among UNHCR and NGOs, which says that UNHCR should maintain its cautious approach concerning private sector fundraising. The NGOs' concern is that once UNHCR presents its new plans for private sector fundraising, there will be only a little room for feedback. We are happy to learn from UNHCR's letter that the agency intends to discuss the subject with NGOs. On their behalf, we are calling on UNHCR to enter into this debate while its plans are still under development.] ♦

MEMBER'S PROFILE

MACOSS — MAURITIUS COUNCIL OF SOCIAL SERVICE

The Mauritius Council of Social Service (MACOSS) is wiring up some of its members to the Internet, thanks to funds from UNDP. Thirty of MACOSS' 150 members are receiving modems, training, and 6 months of Internet access to help them get access to the wealth of information available through e-mail and on the world wide web.

This project is not the first effort by MACOSS to help its NGO members better use the computer technology. In conjunction with the National Computer Board, MACOSS has been ensuring that NGOs receive training in how to use e-mail, the world wide web, and how to make use of computers in their work. Only a few of MACOSS' members have access to e-mail, so communication is limited mostly to fax and post.

Formed in 1965 to act as a coordinating body for social welfare and community development in Mauritius, the Mauritius Council of Social Service has developed since into an umbrella organisation of NGOs working not only for social welfare, but those also working for sustainable development and social development.

MACOSS' main focus is to provide support to NGOs to help in developing what Acting Secretary Manager Ram Nookadee called "a professional NGO sector in Mauritius." It is currently working on setting up a code of conduct for Mauritian NGOs. It aims to share information, work on NGO capacity-building, and act as a voice and broker for NGOs with the government, with UN agencies, and the private sector. MACOSS also coordinates the activities of NGOs in emergencies and natural disasters and programmes of NGOs.

Information is shared, not only through regular communications with members, but also through the monthly magazine "MACOSS Link." Occasional papers on specific issues are published and a documentation centre provides members with access to further information. Seminars are organised as another means of disseminating information.

Once the 30 MACOSS members are hooked up, an evaluation report will be done – something that could prove useful to ICVA as it looks to wire up its members that do not have access to e-mail or the Internet.

* Contact MACOSS: tel: +230.208.44.25; fax: +230.208.63.70; e-mail: macoss@intenet.mu ♦