

DANGEROUS TRANSITION

MU team helps Kosovars struggling to find peace in the rubble of ethnic war.

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With increasing frequency in recent weeks, ethnic Albanian fighters have raked Serbian villages and homesteads with gunfire and have assaulted Serbs on the way to work or to marketplaces in an apparent effort to drive the remaining Serbs out of Kosovo. This marks a stark reversal of the situation a year ago, when Serbian forces conducted a campaign of ethnic cleansing against the Kosovo Albanians, driving more than 850,000 out of the province.

— Kosovo Daily News,

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Going in

Arshad Husain, a child psychiatrist and director of the International Center for Psychosocial Trauma, and I were in Kosovo in March to run a workshop for teachers on post-traumatic stress in children. At 8 a.m., we left Bulgaria, where we had just run a program on leadership for students at American University, and we arrived in Gjakova, Kosovo, about 5 p.m. The distance between the countries isn't that great, but the roads in Kosovo are that bad — potholes huge and small. At times we could have walked faster.

The drivers of the van furnished by American University in Bulgaria insisted that they needed to work in teams of two for safety and that they would take us across Macedonia, but only to the Kosovo border. They felt it was too dangerous to go further. As we approached Kosovo via Macedonia, we began to pass trucks lined up along the highway about seven miles from the border. It sometimes takes them a week to work their way through customs between nations that were until 1990 the single country of Yugoslavia. Even cars can be held up for hours waiting to cross the border. It was shorter for us because we could leave a car on one side of the border, carry our luggage a kilometer to the next customs station and catch a taxi on the other side.

All three countries are mountainous. The villages looked much alike, except in Kosovo there were many new red brick buildings with no windows or doors. Massive rebuilding is going on in the villages that the Serbs destroyed. The first thing the builders do is put on a new roof. For some reason there is a big problem getting windows and doors for the buildings. As a result, we passed villages where walls and roofs of the houses had been rebuilt and people had moved back into them, but they had no windows or doors.

Background on Kosovo

Slobodan Milosevic, the president of Yugoslavia, rose to power by exploiting the sacred rights of the Serbs in Kosovo. By use of myth-making, he roused Serbs to a policy of "get the Albanians out of Yugoslavia" — this despite the fact that Albanians comprise 85 percent of the population of Kosovo, and Serbs and Montenegrins make up only 15

percent. Physically, the Albanians had been a part of this area before records were kept. When Tito was dictator, Kosovo had been an autonomous part of Yugoslavia.

Under Milosevic, a program of harassment of ethnic Albanians was begun in 1990. Most Albanian doctors and health workers were dismissed from hospitals. Six thousand teachers were fired in 1990 and the rest dismissed when they refused to comply with a new Serbian curriculum, which largely eliminated the teaching of Albanian literature and history. Arbitrary arrests and police violence became routine, including arrests for insulting the "patriotic feelings" of Serbian citizens.

These repressive policies stimulated the growth of the Kosovo Liberation Army, which in turn brought more aggression from the Serb army. NATO gave Milosevic many ultimatums to stop the ethnic cleansing of Albanians. These he systematically ignored.

Within hours of the start of NATO bombing, Milosevic's forces inside Kosovo began a campaign of murder, looting and intimidation to drive Kosovo's Albanian population out of the territory. Random shootings and artillery bombardments emptied village after village, and refugees fled either into the surrounding mountains or bordering countries.

The KFOR forces

On our way to Gjakova we passed heavily fortified military KFOR camps — a number of them containing U.S. forces. As our car struggled over the broken roads, we kept passing or being passed by U.N. vans and U.S. humvees, the vehicles that replaced jeeps. Superficially, at least, Kosovo seems to be under total military control. U.S. commanders in Kosovo are assessing whether more troops will be needed to prevent an outbreak of a large-scale conflict. Small-scale attacks happen regularly. Recently in Prague, U.S. secretary of state Madeleine Albright said, "After all that has happened, we do not expect the rival communities in Kosovo to immediately join hands and start singing folk songs."

The Italian army was in charge of security in Gjakova, the city where our workshop was held. The Italians had tanks placed in front of Serb churches and other property to protect them from Albanians. They were alert and seemed to expect more outbreaks of violence.

At a break in our program, I went downtown to get some pictures of the Italian troops.

As I raised my camera, several soldiers pushed me against the wall and took it. One disappeared into the building while another stood guard over me. An English-speaking officer arrived and questioned me as to who I was, what I was doing here, etc. He said he would call the international police, who would further question me. As he rang the police, it occurred to me to give him the copy of the program we were running. He discussed this with the police and they evidently told him I was not a major hazard, so he returned my camera and sent me on my way.

The war and Gjakova

Our host, Agron Zaimi, is a neuropsychiatrist who had been the CEO at the local hospital until removed by the Serbs. He believes much of the weight of the war fell on Gjakova because the population was 97 percent Albanian and the Kosovo Liberation Army was strong here. The Serbs destroyed much of the city, including several historic mosques. On one of my morning walks, I got lost, because rubble gives you few clues as to where you are.

When the Serbs were in control of the town, they arrested, and in some cases killed, local men. Fifteen hundred men from the city remain missing. Kosovo spokespersons believe that different Serbian groups probably hold 500 of them and that the other 1,000 are dead. The exact number is not known because the Serbs will not release names. Many families don't know if their relatives are dead or being held. Irregular Serb forces are rumored to demand \$10,000 a man to return men to their families.

During the conflict, when Serb police came to arrest him, our host escaped out the back door and went to hide in the surrounding mountains. His wife and three children met him days later in an agreed-upon safe place. There are still 5,000 Kosovars unaccounted for, and the anger toward the Serbs is obvious throughout Kosovo. They are so anti-Serbian that they refuse to speak the Serbian language, despite the fact that most of them know it.

Our program

Husain and I were housed in the same hotel as the Italian military. We were the only guests in the restaurant, since it is too expensive for the locals, and there were no other guests in the hotel. Electricity was a problem. Sometimes it came into part of a house, and sometimes it didn't come in at all. It was a three-hours-on and three-hours-off system.

The hotel had its own generator, so when the city system went off, there was a brief moment of darkness and then the lights came back on. Many shops in town had generators operating outside on the sidewalk. It was quite cold when we were there, and we needed to keep our overcoats on when we sat in the lobby. The rooms, however, were heated.

Zaimi now runs the Child & Family Counseling Center, which is jointly sponsored by Hope International Development and Relief Agency and the University of Missouri International Center for Psychosocial Trauma. With our financial support, he has rebuilt a damaged building into a working clinic. He is using the stress management programs we have developed, and they are working very well. The children in his groups include those who were seriously traumatized by the war and those who were not. This combination of children appears to be a good one therapeutically.

The afternoon we worked with the participants on dealing with their own trauma was difficult. We had 70 program participants, most of whom were local teachers. There was also a mixture of psychiatrists and psychologists in the group. The participants had a hard

time admitting to feeling traumatized since the cultural norm is to grit your teeth and bear the pain. Fortunately, some of the psychiatrists came forward with observations about the effects the trauma of war had on them. This helped the teachers to be more open about the effects the killing and destruction had on them. We also had help from Zaimi and several of the psychiatrists in translating our exercises into their cultural frame of reference.

When we awarded the certificates, the students came up one by one to shake our hands. I hadn't realized how depressed and strained-looking some of the people were until I shook their hands and looked into their eyes. It was obvious that it will take much time and hard work to heal the wounds of the recent conflict.

The International Center for Psychosocial Trauma expects to send teams into Kosovo led by Husain three more times this year. The teachers also asked for more psychological help with the children, and we plan to add staff to the Child & Family Counseling Center.

The future

Behind the scenes, Milosevic is working to create crises that will make Kosovo ungovernable. Kosovars, on the other hand, want all Serbs driven out of the area and either the restoration of political autonomy or separate status as a country.

Given the hostility on both sides, it is apparent that the United Nations and NATO will need to keep armed forces in the area for some years to come.