

AGONY IN THE WILDERNESS

A crisis of survival for Kosovar refugees without shelter impels the West to threaten intervention

By JAMES WALSH

THE CULT OF MACHISMO IS SO DEEP-seated in the Balkans that rarely does a grown man permit himself to cry. Yet Rexhep Pajazitaj wept openly as he sat in a makeshift hut in the hills near Golubovac, a village some 40 km west of Kosovo's provincial capital, Pristina. The 63-year-old ethnic Albanian has been camping in the wilderness with his family and other villagers from Cerovik since last spring, when Serbian security forces targeted their hometown as a suspected base of separatist insurgents. Says Pajazitaj, a diabetic struggling to get by without insulin: "We thought we would be back home in a week or two, but the police are still everywhere. Now we're almost out of

food, and I don't think the children will survive the winter. I don't think anybody's children deserve to live like this." Across the room, a young woman was feeding her 18-month-old daughter with dampened breadcrumbs.

These terrorized innocents are hardly alone. Although estimates range up to half a million, probably at least 280,000 Kosovars have been routed from their homes in the seven months since Yugoslav authorities launched a series of full-bore military rampages across Serbia's southern province. At least 50,000 of these civilians, and possibly a good deal more, are still hiding out in the wild as the bitter Balkan winter inexorably approaches. "We can get grain and wheat here, but it takes time," says Hugh Parmer, team coordinator of the U.S. Agency for International Development. "I've seen people living under plastic sheeting in the woods. We're talking about an immediately impending humanitarian crisis."

In fact, snowfalls along Kosovo's western mountains bordering Albania have already blocked routes used by humanitarian relief convoys—a reminder of how fragile the lifelines remain. Now all the warnings of the past month are acquiring sharp focus among Western governments as they begin to sense the imminence of mass deaths. Last week the United Nations Security Council delivered a sharp ultimatum to Slobodan Milosevic, the President of Yugoslavia, demanding that he halt the attacks and negotiate a peace with Kosovo's ethnic Albanian majority. Although West-



KRISTINA SIKSIS/AP

DANGEROUSLY EXPOSED Life under plastic sheeting

“We’re almost out of food, and I don’t think the children will survive the winter.”

ern threats against Milosevic until now have amounted to little more than a limp fist, NATO defense ministers meeting in Portugal last week followed up the U.N. resolution with an “activation” alert for possible air strikes.

Was the U.N. vote sufficient authority for military intervention? Washington seemed to think it was even if Moscow did not. Russia has so many more pressing troubles of its own nowadays, however, that its indulgence of Milosevic is rapidly becoming an unaffordable luxury. “He is more of a burden now,” suggested French Foreign Minister Hubert Védrine last week in New York. “Russia, for its own global reasons, needs to maintain the weight of the Security Council. It is not logical from their point of view to have these decisions made elsewhere.” U.S. Under Secretary of Defense Walter Slocombe explained that the targets of any cruise missile or bombing attacks would be military. “Very, very effective and very, very strong blows would be aimed at the very instruments that Milosevic is using to carry out this repression,” Slocombe said. The danger, of course, is that NATO air strikes could backfire, not only failing to thwart the Kosovo crack-



AT THE BREAKING POINT In the mountains near the Montenegrin border, some of the tens of thousands of shelterless civilians

reach some of them," she reports. "And when we finally brought some aid, we found out they were no longer there. We're now trying to find out where they went."

Asked whether Serbian authorities really want the Kosovars to return home, a Western diplomat in Yugoslavia smiles and replies simply, "No." In effect, this unstat- ed policy has ruled out any chance of concilia- tion with ethnic Albanians, making belat- ed demands by the U.N. and NATO all but impossible to achieve. Last Friday a close aide to Ibrahim Rugova, head of the Kosovars' self-styled internal government, was shot and seriously wounded in Pristina only two days after Rugova's defense min- ister was shot dead in Albania. The attacks may have been K.L.A. attempts to block any deals short of full independence. In past negotiations, Rugova has shown a willing- ness to accept some form of autonomy.

European foreign ministries lately have promoted the idea of deferring all of Kosovo's political disputes for several months, allowing the crisis on the ground to cool off. Milosevic seems unready to en- tertain that strategy, however, while the cooling off in any case is coming literally and with a vengeance. When winter sets in sometime within the next few weeks, the tens of thousands of Kosovars living with- out shelter will run out of options.

Says relief worker Webb: "I have seen a lot of desperate and hungry people. I have seen babies being delivered in the bush and seriously ill people without any medication or treatment. They definitely want to return to their homes, but they will not go any- where as long as police remain in their vil- lages. Also, some of those who have returned have found that their homes have been burned or otherwise destroyed." Winter's arrival, she points out, will present hardships beyond those of exposure and difficulties of access. "It's not just the chill. When the flour gets wet, it becomes useless."

Even those internal refugees who have found accommodation are usually sharing quarters with fellow Kosovars who cannot afford to feed and take care of them. Webb explains, "People are perfectly aware that they will die if they stay out, so many of them have settled in farmhouses and barns. Sometimes you walk into a house and find a hundred people inside." Would NATO air strikes save them if ultimatums cannot? At this point, a miracle from heav- en might be the only thing that works, but the invocation of God's name in the Bal- kans nowadays seems almost a sacrilege.

—Reported by Dejan Anastasijevic/Pristina and William Dowell/New York

down but making Milosevic a hero at home.

Already, the Yugoslav strongman has virtually wiped out organized resistance from the Kosovo Liberation Army, a ragtag militia fighting for independence. Late last week, Yugoslav soldiers and paramilitary police were busy mopping up K.L.A. remnants in the province's north, having shelled and put to the torch another string of lightly defended villages. If the military campaign had been aimed simply at weed- ing out insurgents, Kosovo's crisis might have remained manageable. But the scorched-earth offensives, seemingly de- signed to incite panic, have emptied wide stretches of the countryside, putting to flight up to a fourth of the province's popu- lation. Some refugees have crossed borders to find shelter in Albania, Montenegro, even Bosnia, while others have moved in with hard-pressed friends or relatives. In all events, the displaced villagers remaining in Kosovo, especially those still camping outdoors, are near the breaking point.

Taking the measure of their plight is difficult enough. Relief workers face sys- tematic obstructions from Serbian authori- ties who bar entry to combat zones and ac- cuse the foreigners of aiding and abetting

the enemy. The official line, unsurprisingly, holds that no crisis exists. Milosevic told U.S. envoy Christopher Hill in mid-Sep- tember, "The term 'humanitarian catastro- phe' that we have been hearing in the past weeks is not founded on reality. It is simply a pretext for continuing pressures on Serbia and the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia." Milosevic's sentiment was echoed last week by Colonel Bozidar Filic, spokesman for the Serbian police in Kosovo. "Most displaced civilians have by now returned to their homes," he said. On a tour of the province, Serbian President Milan Milutinovic com- mended the security forces for their "re- sponsibility, honor and patriotism."

The truth is that most Kosovar villagers are terrified to return home for fear that men and boys of military age will be round- ed up as suspected K.L.A. partisans. Refu- gees who took to the hills, moreover, are of- ten in such remote parts that merely pinpointing their whereabouts is difficult. Anthea Webb of the World Food Program says she heard of some 20,000 people scat- tered in the woods of Rugova Canyon in Kosovo's southwest, about 1,500 m above sea level. "I had to rent a horse and ride it for a couple of hours before I was able to

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