

## MACEDONIA 1999: THE INFLUX OF KOSOVAN REFUGEES

Since its independence in 1991 Macedonia has escaped the violence and inter-ethnic strife which has characterised most of post-communist former Yugoslavia. However, NATO's war threatens to undermine this stability. Like Kosovo, Macedonia has a sizeable Albanian minority which is mainly located in the western part of the country. Although the Albanians have never had autonomy within Macedonia and the two Albanian political parties have taken or take part in governing coalitions, Albanian politicians repeatedly voice grievances concerning their status. Their demands range from wanting to be a constituent element of the Republic to gaining more equal representation for Albanians in the state administration. The question of the recognition of the (Albanian) University of Tetovo remains a disputed issue.

The influx of thousands of refugees from Kosovo as a result of NATO's attacks on Yugoslavia threatens to destabilise the ethnic composition of the country. Unofficial estimates put the current number of Albanian refugees from Kosovo at about 200,000. This represents 10% of the total population of Macedonia and increases the population of Albanian inhabitants from about 25% to some one-third. If this situation persists it will not only cause severe economic problems but also produce political consequences.

None of this comes as a surprise to the Macedonians themselves. Indeed, Snezana Osmanli - a former advisor to Macedonian president, Kiro Gligorov - told BHHRG observers in 1998 that she feared that any imposed solution to the Albanian problem in Kosovo would lead to war since it would include more countries than just Yugoslavia. President Gligorov himself warned two years ago that war in Kosovo would result in some 400,000 people seeking refuge and, in the event of this happening, he proposed a 'corridor' to channel such people through Macedonia to third countries.

On the other hand, the Western media - either blissfully ignorant of the dangers to Macedonian stability or keen to wag a moralistic finger at the country - and Western politicians (among them Overseas Development ministers Clare Short of Great Britain and Herfkens of the Netherlands) have severely criticised the Macedonian authorities for mishandling the refugee crisis. For a country which has played by Western rules with regard to its minorities and has accepted such a relatively huge number of refugees (200,000 people would equal some 25 million refugees pouring into the USA, for example) this criticism is unfair, to say the least. Moreover, the West has promised financial aid none of which, so far, has materialized. (According to one Macedonian journalist on the daily newspaper *Vecer* only Taiwan has honoured its promises of financial support).

An officer with the British Army told BHHRG that Macedonia had (undeservedly) received negative coverage in the Western press. As an example, he pointed to a case involving a young Albanian male who had escaped from the Stenkovec refugee camp. When the Macedonian police arrested him he received 'a little flick in the neck'. After a while the story was circulating that the police had murdered an Albanian refugee by slitting his throat. According to the British officer, there are many similar examples of exaggeration.

In Macedonia itself the opposition Socialist Party (SDSM) has criticised the government for its mishandling of the crisis. Radmilla Shekerinska, the party's spokesman, lamented the fact that the government had done nothing to dispel the unfavourable image of Macedonia presented in the Western press. The crisis is already impacting on domestic politics within the country. At one stage, Gligorov considered implementing a State of Emergency. However, this would have required parliamentary approval. The present coalition consisting of the Democratic Party of Albanians (DPA), the Democratic Alternative (DA) and VMRO feared that if they acceded to this the president could use his powers to appoint a new government which would contain the SDSM. The proposal, therefore, came to nothing.

Bearing in mind that presidential elections are scheduled for November 1999 it is interesting to note that as well as president Gligorov, Vasil Tupurkovsky had been invited to attend NATO's 50th birthday celebrations in Washington. Tupurkovsky's DA is the smallest party in the coalition, yet many see its leader, who has strong support from the US, as the only credible candidate for the presidency.

On Friday 23<sup>rd</sup> April BHHRG observers witnessed an anti-NATO demonstration in Skopje which had been organised by the Serbian Democratic Party of Macedonia. The demonstration was attended by between 5,000 and 10,000 people and proceeded without any incidents.

Both the Party for Democratic Prosperity (PDP, now in opposition) and the DPA stress publicly that they are committed to Macedonia's independence within which they want to improve the status of the Albanian population. Both parties say that the KLA is not active in Macedonia and has no plans to operate in the country. Yet, many in Macedonia suspect the DPA of supporting the KLA. Its vice-president, Iljaz Halimi (who is also a vice-president of parliament) stated that he thought Kosovo-Albanian leader Rugova had lost all legitimacy to represent the Kosovars since appearing with Milosevic on Serb TV. Instead, the new Kosovo government - recently proclaimed by the KLA in Tirana - has to be seen as the legitimate representative of the Kosovars. Moreover, Arben Xhafferi, DPA party leader, said to the newspaper daily *Dnevnik* that the KLA has no intention of spreading its activities to Macedonia. Radmilla Shekerinska of the SDU wondered how Xhafferi could know this without having close contact with the KLA.

Since their exodus after the first NATO bombs fell in late March widely varying numbers have circulated in the media as to the total number of refugees from Kosovo. On 25<sup>th</sup> April the Macedonian authorities reported that 149,641 refugees had been registered of whom 68,056 were accommodated in camps. The other refugees had found shelter in the houses of Albanian families in Macedonia. On 23<sup>rd</sup> April, UNHCR estimated that a total number of 136,400 refugees had entered Macedonia of whom 52,400 were accommodated in refugee centres.

Bejtulah Demi, leader of the Tetovo branch of the PDP, told BHHRG that families in the town now housed at least 30,000 refugees thus doubling its population although this dramatic increase is not noticeable on the streets of Tetovo. What is more, Demi denied that any refugees had come to Tetovo before the NATO bombardments. Yet, in October 1998 Abduladi Vejseli of the PDP said that a few thousand Kosovars had found refuge in Tetovo. The reason for this contradiction remains unclear but it demonstrates the difficulty of getting precise figures.

BHHRG observers visited three refugee camps - Neprosteni near Tetovo and Stenkovec I and II near the Blace border-crossing. These three camps accommodate some 48,000 people. Conditions in the camps was generally good. It seemed that after a problematic phase the organisation of the camps had improved considerably. There was no disease in the camps. A few refugees had been treated for gunshot wounds (in Neprosteni only 3 out of 6,000 people had gunshot wounds, according to a German doctor of the Johanniter relief agency). Nor was there any sign of people suffering any other form of physical maltreatment; BHHRG observers did not see people with black eyes or broken limbs, for example. The Johanniter medical staff mainly treated patients for hypothermia, severe colds and low blood pressure.

The Macedonian police guards the camps. To enter a camp people need permission from the Ministry of the Interior, yet in practice the police seems very lenient in this respect - at least towards visitors from the West. Moreover, security was light with just a few policemen guarding the camps. The fences surrounding the refugee centres would be easy to scale making escape very easy.

There was no sign of political activity such as KLA recruitment in the camps although it is impossible to say whether some of these activities were going on as security is rather lax. It is very easy for anyone wanting to contact the refugees in the camps to walk up to the fences and simply talk to those inside without being prohibited from doing so by the Macedonian police. Both British and French officers feared that with time this could become a problem. Large numbers of young men were present despite the fact that allegations had been made that the young men of Kosovo had 'disappeared' from the face of the earth during the hostilities.