REVERSAL OF FORTUNE:
Yugoslavia’s Refugee Crisis since the Ethnic Albanian Return to Kosovo
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Cover Photo: Displaced from Kosovo, Mila Osojic, waits at a roadblock near Cacak, Serbia, as the police prevent a convoy of displaced Serbs from proceeding to Belgrade. September 9, 1999. Photo: AP/Mikica Petrovic
What a difference a year makes. Before NATO’s bombs began falling in late March 1999, Kosovo’s ethnic Serb population—estimated at the time at about 200,000—enjoyed a position of dominance and privilege over Kosovo’s 1.8 million ethnic Albanians. Today, the ethnic Albanian refugees have returned with a sense of triumph, and, all too often, a hunger for revenge. Most of the Serbs, Roma (“Gypsies”), and other minorities have fled; those who remain in Kosovo are mostly concentrated in a few enclaves. Serbs and Roma are unsafe traveling between enclaves or going out at night. Speaking Serbian on the street in any of Kosovo’s cities brings the threat of on-the-spot murder. Ethnically motivated killings, disappearances, and arson continue.

In December 1999, the U.S. Committee for Refugees (USCR) traveled to Serbia and Montenegro, the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (FRY), to assess the conditions of the latest group to be violently displaced by the Balkan wars. USCR heard the testimonies of the Balkans’ newest victims and reports on the impact of this, and earlier waves of refugees, on a besieged and wounded society.

The old Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (SFRY) was a federation of six local republics along the Adriatic Coast. Its capital, Belgrade, was located in Serbia, and Serbs represented the largest of the Yugoslav nationality groups, comprising about 36 percent of the SFRY’s total population. Serbs outside and within Serbia were the Yugoslav nationality group most likely to view the SFRY as a viable state and to resist its dissolution.

Serbia, unlike the other SFRY republics, also had two autonomous regions within its borders: Vojvodina, an ethnically mixed, rich agricultural region bordering Hungary with a large ethnic Hungarian minority; and Kosovo, an overwhelmingly ethnic Albanian-populated region, rich in mineral and energy resources and bordering Albania. Ethnic Albanians and Hungarians, who do not even speak a Slavic language (and thus never identified as “Yugoslavs”, i.e., south Slavs) were the least likely groups in the SFRY to regard it as a viable state.

On April 24, 1987, then-Serbian Communist Party chief Slobodan Milosevic, standing at Kosovo Polje, the scene of the battle 600 years before in which Serbs heroically fought—and lost—to the Turks, established his nationalist credentials by telling a Serb crowd, “No one should dare to beat you.” He exhorted the crowd, “You should stay here. This is your land. These are your houses, your meadows and gardens. Your memories.” Milosevic rode Serb nationalism to power. In September 1990, he engi-
neered a new Constitution of Serbia that stripped Kosovo and Vojvodina of their autonomous status; he became president of Serbia that December.

In June 1991, Croatia and Slovenia declared independence from the SFRY; the republics of Bosnia and Hercegovina (hereafter referred to as "Bosnia") and Macedonia later followed suit. Serbs, who previously represented the largest and dominant nationality of the SFRY, suddenly became minority communities in the newly independent republics. These republics, especially Croatia, expressed their own strong brand of nationalism that did little to assuage the fears of local Serb communities outside Serbia.

As Yugoslavia broke apart, the international community recognized the independence of former Yugoslav republics, citing the principle of self-determination and the right of republics (but not of Vojvodina and Kosovo) to secede under the Yugoslav constitution. Opponents of independence, mostly Serbs, argued that secession violated Yugoslavia’s territorial integrity. After Croatian and Bosnian independence became irrevocable, Serb communities living in those countries contended that their right to self-determination was being violated, and that they also had the right to live under a government of their choice. In Croatia, local Serbs in eastern Slavonia, Western Slavonia, and the Krajina rebelled, backed by the Serb-dominated Yugoslav army. After six months of fighting in 1991, they gained control of about one-third of Croatia.

Ethnic Serb refugees started entering Serbia as early as 1991. In fact, USCR published its first issue paper on the Balkans, Yugoslavia Torn Asunder: Lessons for Protecting Refugees from Civil War, in 1992 in response to this influx into Serbia (and to other refugees fleeing from Croatia into Hungary and Slovenia).

After war broke out in Bosnia in the spring of 1992, more refugees fled into Serbia and Montenegro. In response to the influx from Bosnia, USCR issued another paper, East of Bosnia: Refugees in Serbia and Montenegro, in 1993. USCR wrote a companion paper on the refugee influx from Bosnia into Croatia, Croatia’s Crucible: Providing Asylum for Refugees from Bosnia and Hercegovina.

The largest influx of refugees into Serbia occurred in August 1995 when the Croatian armed forces swept through the Serb-populated Krajina region, causing between 120,000 and 200,000 Serbs to flee in less than a week (in May 1995, Croatia had reclaimed Western Slavonia, causing about 12,000 Serbs to flee). The last refugee census in FRY occurred in 1996. At that time, the authorities registered 566,275 refugees, of whom 537,937 were in Serbia and 28,338 in Montenegro. Nearly 300,000 originated in Croatia, and about 250,000 were from Bosnia.

The FRY experienced one more major influx of refugees before the 1999 wave of internally displaced people from Kosovo. In late 1997 and early 1998, another 50,000 refugees entered Serbia from the eastern Slavonia region of Croatia, which borders Serbia, as that segment of Croatia reverted to Croatian government control.

By 1999, few of these refugees had repatriated (less than 2,000) or been resettled in third countries (less than 4,000). About 42,000 had been granted FRY citizenship, and were regarded as having locally integrated in Yugoslavia. As of November 1999, the government refugee figures totaled 504,100, of whom 480,900 were in Serbia and 23,200 in Montenegro. The more than 60,000 drop in the refugee total reflects a decrease in the estimated number of refugees from Bosnia. The border with the Serb-controlled Republika Srpska is open, and travel from FRY is visa-free. During the bombing campaign, it is believed that many Bosnian refugees may have relocated to Republika Srpska, even though they originated in Federation areas, where they would be in the minority. (Persons originating in Serb-controlled areas of Bosnia are excluded from refugee status in FRY.)

The world’s attention was appropriately riveted in the spring of 1999 by the mass exodus of ethnic Albanians after the start of the NATO bombing campaign of March 24, when Serb military, police, and paramilitaries drove hundreds of thousands from their homes. But receiving less attention was the wave of displacement triggered by the entry of NATO troops into Kosovo (KFOR) and the dramatic return of the ethnic Albanian population.

The Yugoslav government said that 229,600 people were displaced from Kosovo into Serbia proper, mostly in June 1999. As of November 1999, the government said that 199,600 were in Serbia. A census in Montenegro in January 2000 registered about 31,200 there. Although most of the displaced are ethnic Serbs, up to 50,000 Roma fled Kosovo as well.

The numbers are disputed. The Kosovo Serb National Council claims that about 100,000 Serbs are still living in Kosovo. By some accounts, up to 25,000 Roma are still living in Kosovo. The sum of Serbs and Roma who reportedly have fled (230,000)
and those who reportedly remain (125,000) would be a larger number than the estimated 250,000 Serbs and Roma living in Kosovo before the war, casting obvious doubt on the accuracy either of the post-war count or of the pre-war estimate.

Undoubtedly, there is some double counting of the displaced population. They have not remained still. Many have moved several times since leaving Kosovo, staying briefly with family or friends in one place before moving to more stable accommodations elsewhere. During the summer, the Serbian authorities blocked the movement of displaced people from Kosovo into Belgrade. Although such restrictions have been lifted, municipalities continue to jockey to avoid hosting more of the displaced.

Although of questionable accuracy, the official, combined total of refugees from Bosnia and Croatia and internally displaced people from Kosovo in the FRY comes to more than 700,000. Whatever the actual number, the presence of uprooted people is clearly part of the Serbian landscape. A Bosnian refugee now living in Vojvodina who had settled in Kosovo only to be displaced from there as well, observed, “When I walk through this country, I meet more refugees than citizens.”

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**GENERAL CONDITIONS**

In Serbia, looks can be deceiving. The Serbs are a proud people, and do not want to show a foreigner, particularly an American, that they are suffering. They are also a society used to a relatively high standard of living. Their needs, therefore, are not always immediately obvious. Generally (the notable exception being Roma), refugees and internally displaced people appear to be in good health, to have clean accommodations, and to be adequately clothed.

Yet, current estimates place unemployment in Serbia at more than 30 percent, and joblessness among refugees and displaced people is likely to be at least twice that percentage. Many factories were damaged or destroyed by NATO bombing, and in many cases were functioning poorly before being knocked out of commission. Agricultural production is also down.

As is true of the population generally—and particularly true of its vulnerable segments, such as the elderly, the infirm, and single women with children—the main problem for refugees and displaced people is the lack of jobs and income. They simply have no earning power. A person who earns the average
Serbian income of 80 Deutsche marks (DM) (about $40) per month cannot afford 150 to 250 DM (between $75 and $125) per month for food.

Although needy refugees do receive food aid, the problem is not principally a lack of food; rather, food assistance supplements meager income, saving refugees money they would otherwise spend on food. The capacity for food production in Serbia has not diminished, according to a World Food Program (WFP) official, but because the government has set prices for staples at a low level, producers of sugar, vegetable oil, and milk either have stopped production or sell their products elsewhere or on the black market (at prices that the poor cannot afford).

The Yugoslav government is often late in paying retirees their pensions, stretching out the pay periods, or missing pension checks entirely. Elderly refugees from Croatia have not been able to claim their pensions from the Croatian government, despite having paid into the SFRY’s social security system during their working lives, before the break up of Yugoslavia and Croatian independence. In actuality, even if retirees did receive their pensions on a regular basis, that would not cover living expenses. Some pensioners have received coupons for firewood, for example, but lack the money to hire someone to transport the wood to their homes.

The government’s social welfare system has essentially collapsed, and the rolls of “social cases” continue to grow. Some 33 percent of the population are reportedly living below the poverty level. The percentage among the uprooted is undoubtedly higher.

Although health care is supposedly free, decent and timely health care usually comes at a high (bribed) price. There is a critical shortage of pharmaceuticals. The problem stems, in part, from President Slobodan Milosevic’s takeover of the country’s leading pharmaceutical firm, ICN, and a near monopoly of the pharmaceutical industry by the JUL party, headed by Mira Markovic, President Milosevic’s wife.

Some economists predict either more price fixing and malnutrition or another round of hyperinflation and heightened economic instability. Some predictions are dire, including warnings that the death rate among vulnerable groups, such as pensioners, could increase sharply.

CONDITIONS IN COLLECTIVE CENTERS

Refugees and internally displaced persons in collective centers generally live in poorer conditions than those USCR visited in private accommodations. Collective centers have an advantage: residents pay no rent or utilities and receive food and other humanitarian assistance regularly. On the other hand, most collective centers are grim. They often lack privacy, and the people living in them, especially the refugees from Bosnia and Croatia, tend to be elderly. Heating is sometimes poor, in part, because the centers were not constructed for residential purposes.

Collective centers vary widely in quality and population density. Some, including converted schools and hospitals, are not especially overcrowded and provide separate rooms for families. Others, often former “cultural centers,” are dismal, drafty, and crowded.

Among the worst USCR visited is a collective center for refugees in Kraljevo, a large, single room holding 44 people, many of whom had been living together in this same space since 1992. A former dance hall, its high ceiling prevents heat retention, and the room temperature inside can fall below 15°C (about 58°F) in the winter. Lacking windows, the room is dark in mid-afternoon. Incongruously, a disco ball still hangs from the ceiling and music is piped in over a loudspeaker. As USCR conducted interviews with the center’s residents, Bob Dylan’s voice commented on the scene: How does it feel to be on your own, with no direction home, a complete unknown, like a rolling stone.

The residents look old and haggard. A sense of hopelessness pervades the place. A middle-aged man from Gospic, a town in the Croatian Krajina region, has been here with his mother since August 1995. She suffers from diabetes. “When we first came, CARE helped,” he says. “We haven’t seen them for five or six months.” [CARE had been very active in Serbia, and had continued operating during the bombing until three of its workers, including two international staff members, were arrested and accused of spying. With the local staff member still in jail during USCR’s visit (he was released shortly afterwards), CARE was just resuming many of its suspended activities.] “There’s no work. No heating fuel.”

Another man comments, “The heating is the same as last year,” meaning it was just as bad then. He
PERCENTAGE OF REFUGEES AND INTERNALLY DISPLACED PEOPLE WITHIN SERBIA'S GENERAL POPULATION

1. Novi Beograd
2. Stari Grad
3. Vracar
4. Zvezdara
5. Savski Venac
6. Cukarica
7. Rakovica
8. Vozdovac
9. Lapovo

Source: World Food Program
now joins the conversation. “I don’t have a house anymore. I have no place to return to. I have no opportunities here. I have been here four to five years. I don’t have citizenship. I can’t stay.” He asks about resettlement to the United States. USCR tells him that he does not appear to meet the U.S. resettlement criteria. The man shrugs.

USCR asks another person what her most important needs are. The question stuns her. After a moment of reflection, she says, “We need everything. I can’t decide what is most important. Maybe gloves.” A moment passes. “What I would most want is a new house where I knew it was safe.”

Within the same municipality stands one of the better collective centers, Moshin Cingaj, a converted motel housing 38 people, all displaced from Kosovo. Each family has its own living space. Oxfam and Swiss Disaster Relief provide regular assistance. The municipality has supplied the residents with boards for constructing interior walls. The building has new stoves and a water boiler for heat. The residents meet with USCR in a separate common room.

The families, mostly from Pec and Suva Reka, have lived in the center for about two months, although they left Kosovo in mid-June. They also have complaints, but not as desperate, or as hopeless, as those in the neighboring collective center. They complain about the food, which they cannot prepare themselves. As with other collective centers, hot meals are delivered daily. They leave much to be desired. “We have forgotten what meat is,” says a young woman in black (a sign of mourning). She also complains about the scarcity of medicines and the lack of jobs. “Even 20-year-old boys have no work,” she says. They lack documents for renewing driver’s licenses and school records. The children go to the public schools, but they have difficulty buying school supplies.

Whether one lives in a decent collective center or a bad one seems to be a matter of dumb luck. USCR visited a relatively nice collective center on the Avala mountain outside Belgrade, a former psychiatric hospital. Just down the road, USCR dropped in on another collective center, a converted restaurant, now home to 129 people from the same village in Kosovo as those in the neighboring collective center. Cots were crowded together with no partitions separating them. The residents wore their winter coats indoors. Because of a three-way dispute between the Serbian Commissioner for Refugees, “the owner” of the restaurant, and the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) over the “rent” for the facility, the heat was turned off. (It is not a privately owned facility, but “socially owned,” so ownership is at least indirectly governmental, yet the problem apparently stems, in part, from a disagreement between the restaurant “owner” and the Serbian Commissioner for Refugees.)

The residents express anxiety that the winter cold will intensify and that the building won’t provide sufficient protection from the falling temperatures. Some sleep in the restaurant porch, cots flat against plate glass windows. They ask for wood planks to cover the drafty windows. In this case, the municipality has not agreed to provide boards, and no one else has responded to their request. The residents say that ten of the children have contracted pneumonia.

An old woman sees foreign visitors and becomes agitated. She shouts, “At the end of the 20th century, a father and son should not be made to sleep in the same bed.”

The residents are angry, suspicious. They say that the people in the collective center just down the road receive more food and warmer winter clothing. They say that the Red Cross, which had supplied canned food, has stopped. They accuse the Red Cross of delivering “old clothes in bad condition.” Strangely, they express fear that ethnic Albanians “roaming freely” about Serbia will attack them, and say that ethnic Albanians should not be allowed to cross from Kosovo into Serbia proper. Have they actually seen any ethnic Albanians here? “Someone was photographing our cars.” They explain that the Albanians accuse them of stealing their cars when they left Kosovo. “We fear tomorrow that someone could drop a bomb here,” says a middle-aged man wearing a camouflage vest, who acts as the group’s unofficial leader. Resentment and anger about his current situation are directed toward ethnic Albanians he believes are moving about Serbia proper. “Albanians can walk freely in Belgrade and come here, but we can’t walk freely in Serbia and find jobs.”

**COMPARABLE CONDITIONS FOR REFUGEES AND DISPLACED PEOPLE**

It is hard to distinguish between conditions for the “old caseload” refugees from Bosnia and Croatia and those for the newer arrivals from Kosovo. In both cases, the quality of their living conditions is dictated less by their length of stay or by their status as refugees or internally displaced, but rather by their own resources, including the precious existence of relatives in Serbia.
or Montenegro willing and able to help. Another obvious factor is whether the displaced person is an ethnic Serb, the overwhelming majority, or Roma.

In general, people living in collective centers are worse off than those living in private accommodations. They lack the means—a job, savings, or family—that would enable them to live in a private home. Often, they are elderly or lacking the skills in demand in an economy where jobs are scarce.

In some collective centers that USCR visited, refugees and internally displaced people were mixed together, along with local "social cases"—unemployed people who have not been displaced directly by war and violence, but who represent a growing segment of a population with high rates of joblessness and little purchasing power for necessities such as food, rent, and utilities.

One location with such a mixture was a converted workers barracks on the grounds of the Sartid steel factory in the municipality of Smederevo, east of Belgrade. Of the 1,000 forced migrants living in the Sartid barracks, about one-third are refugees from the Krajina region of Croatia and about two-thirds recent arrivals from Kosovo. The factory has housed refugees since 1992.

The 30-year-old barracks are run down—the roofs, doors, and windows are barely maintained. The camp has frequent power failures. The camp manager, an employee of the factory, said, "We have done what is necessary for people who need water, sanitation, and heat," but, he said, at most, the center could only be propped up through this winter. "This will not last another winter," he said.

Sartid is a "socially owned" company, one of many enterprises that show Yugoslavia still clinging to its socialist past, as it enters a transitional era of economic uncertainty and instability. In fact, most of the displaced had been Sartid employees in Kosovo, putting their names high on the list for acceptance. USCR asked the camp manager whether the factory could employ the refugees and displaced. He shook his head. The factory, only slightly damaged by NATO bombing, is not running at full capacity, he said. He blamed the factory's woes on international economic sanctions, which prohibit international commerce and investment with Serbia (with exceptions for humanitarian aid). Many local people, including those living in the same barracks as the refugees and internally displaced, lack jobs as well.

Despite the poor conditions at Sartid, there is a waiting list to get in. Perhaps the strongest indication that the economy is failing is that those wanting to enter the collective center are refugees and displaced people who, until now, have lived in private accommodations. The camp manager explains, "Something is happening in reverse. People are wanting to live in the collective center rather than with a host family. There are a lot who would like to come to this center. They would get free food and no rent. The camp itself is overcrowded. Conditions in the camp are not better, but people outside the camp can't afford to pay for food, rent, utilities."

USCR visits the barracks and meets a displaced person from Kosovo who had spent two months living with his sister before moving here. She could no longer afford to keep him, his wife, and their children in her place. He is embittered, sarcastic, but willing to talk. He says that the camp's water and sanitation systems need to be rehabilitated. The children have no winter clothes; no one has money. He says that there is a need for psychological support, "but I don't feel the need personally." Seeing USCR taking notes, he dictates a message: "We are tired of NATO and tired of American harassment."

**POSSIBILITIES FOR RETURN**

Many refugees and internally displaced people express an interest in return, but, when pressed, usually qualify their wishes to firm guarantees for their safety, which, for the displaced from Kosovo, means Serbian police protection.

The most noticeable difference in attitudes toward return is not between refugees from Bosnia or Croatia and the displaced from Kosovo or between men and women, but rather between generations. Older people, generally, seem more interested in return. Younger ones, on the other hand, tend not only to see greater obstacles to return, but perhaps to see greater opportunity in not returning.

In a collective center in Cacak, an old man tells USCR that he obtained his Croatian passport and returned on his own a month ago to see his lost property in Sisak in the Krajina region of Croatia. "Everything was burned down," he said. He digs out a photograph of his old house. "It’s all burned out now. No roof. No doors. But the walls are still intact. It could be rebuilt." He prefers to go back as part of an organized return program, perhaps in the spring.

"Only an insane person would not think of return," he says.

But many sane people, in fact, would not
consider returning at all. In the same Cacak collective center a woman dressed in black from Trnava tells USCR, “My husband was hanged there. I could not return.” She can’t go back. But she also feels that she can’t remain in the collective center year after year. “Every bird needs its nest,” she says.

Even those who take active steps to return often find their way blocked. An 80-year-old refugee from Lika, a town in the Croatian Krajina, now a resident of a collective center in Kraljevo, told USCR that he had applied four times to repatriate. “I do not have my Croatian citizenship papers. I applied. I filled out the forms. I never got back a reply.” He said that he had a large house, but that he does not have any documents proving his ownership. “I would only go back to my own place,” he said, “not to any other place.”

He says, “There is little work here, none for older people. There is no solution but to go home.” Will his adult children go back as well, USCR asks. “Younger people might fear return,” he says. “My wife and I will go back, not the rest of the family.”

For many, the major obstacle to return is fear for personal safety. One refugee who originally fled from Sarajevo, and from there went to Istok, Kosovo, expressed doubt about any guarantees for his safety in either place. “What legal provision would allow us to return to Sarajevo or Kosovo?” he asked bitterly. “I would trade both for a bottle of whiskey.”

Several refugees expressed concern that they might be falsely charged with war crimes if they returned. A bearded refugee from Knin, the capital of the Krajina region of Croatia, perhaps in his 30s, living in a dismal one-room collective center in Subotica near the Hungarian border, said, “I can’t go home. There is no work. I wouldn’t be safe. They have lists of war criminals. I worked for the railroad. I never hurt anyone, but I could be accused.”

**RETURN TO KOSOVO**

Internally displaced persons are generally less concerned than refugees about war crimes accusations per se. Their greater concern is the general level of danger for non-ethnic Albanians in Kosovo. A man living in a collective center in Belgrade says, “Those returning to Mitrovica [a divided city in northern Kosovo with Serbs concentrated in the part of the town north of the
DISPLACED SERBS’ ACCOUNTS OF THE ETHNIC ALBANIAN EXODUS

Not surprisingly, none of the Serbs displaced from Kosovo took any responsibility for the exodus of ethnic Albanians that occurred in late March and April 1999. Nearly everyone described their relations with ethnic Albanian neighbors prior to the outbreak of violence as good, and blamed the escalation of tensions on outside agitators from Albania.

A factory manager in Istok said, “The Albanians were financially strong. They were very rich down there, well off. It surprised me that they would do this. They paid no taxes. They used to say, ‘This village is America’ [i.e., rich].”

He said, “I witnessed good relations. I found it unbelievable when the bombing started that they would all leave. Someone ordered the Albanians to leave Kosovo. At that moment, they were not harassed by Serbs. A convoy of them from Mitrovica came through Istok. I was sorry to see them leave. The police and army secured the road, providing them with bread and water. A woman with a baby received medical care.”

He claimed, “They burned down their houses themselves.” He said that two Albanian families stayed with his family. “They said they had to leave, that they were afraid. I asked them who they were afraid of. They said they were ordered to leave by the KLA and to burn down their own homes.”

He told of another ethnic Albanian who was a friend. “He called me from Montenegro and asked me to protect his wife and four children and to bring them to the border. I told him that I would take care of them, and that there was no need for them to leave. He insisted. My wife and I took them to the border. When we reached the checkpoint, the woman kissed my wife on the cheek three times [the traditional Serbian way to say goodbye to a woman]. I was touched.”

A high school teacher from Suva Reka, however, suggested that relations had been deteriorating for quite some time. He taught in a school that included both ethnic Serbs and Albanians. “About two or three years ago, our Albanian neighbors stopped talking to us. We could feel something was happening. Many of my colleagues, the teachers in the school, were Albanians. They would turn their head when I spoke to them. They started throwing objects at us.”

Ibar River] are getting killed. I don’t know if there is pressure to return, but people are afraid to return.” He added, “We would all go back with the army.”

People displaced from Kosovo accuse the Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA) of committing crimes against them. Many said that they would not feel safe unless the Serb police and army returned in force, and punished those who had committed crimes. The young woman in black in the Moshin Cingaj collective center in Kraljevo said, “I would like to go home, but it would be possible to live with Albanians only if the Serb army and police came back.”

She said, “I believe in a peaceful solution, some sort of a deal. But that means first to get the immigrants from Albania out of Kosovo, the people with blood on their hands.”

The woman in black said, “I have nothing against my neighbors, but I would not live with people with blood on their hands. My brother was killed. He was supplying the army with food. On the way from the village, he was ambushed. Terrorists were hiding in the woods and watching as Serbs went by. There were neighbors who knew the location. We know who did it. Maybe we could live with our neighbors again if we knew that the people who did the crimes would be punished.”

Among both refugees and internally displaced persons are people, usually the elderly, who express feeling intense connection to their lost properties. Many people insisted that they were interested only in returning to their original homes, and categorically rejected relocating. “I was born in the same house as my father, my grandfather, and my great-grandfather,” says a man displaced from Musutiste, a mixed Serb and Albanian village in Kosovo. “I do not think we stand a chance here. There is no money. We can’t earn a living.”

Would you go anywhere else, USCR asked him, even another part of Kosovo? “I would never move to another part of Kosovo,” he said, “only to the place where my father’s and grandfathers’ graves are.”

A young man also living in the collective center (perhaps the old man’s son) had been listening quietly to the interview. But hearing this, he spoke: “I’d go to Australia. I’d go to any country that would take me.”
INTEGRATING LOCALLY: CITIZENSHIP

Although the prospects for refugee repatriation may have improved somewhat since the death of President Tudjman, the election of Stipe Mesic as president, and the dawn of a new political era in Croatia, real progress toward significant repatriation has yet to occur. In the past, hopeful rhetoric from Croatia has not been matched by positive action. It remains likely that the majority of Croatian refugees will not go back. Sharing language, culture, and ethnic identity with the local Serb population, the overwhelming majority of refugees ought to be able to integrate in Serbia. The obstacles, however, are both economic and legal.

FRY's citizenship law did not come into effect until June 1997. So far, about 42,000 refugees have become naturalized FRY citizens, and another 41,000 have applied for citizenship. Although no refugee applicants have been denied outright, the grant of citizenship is not automatic. Furthermore, the government suspended the processing of citizenship applications during the NATO bombing. Government officials said that FRY's citizenship application records were destroyed in the bombing. By year's end, it had not resumed processing applications.

FRY does not permit dual citizenship. Many refugees who still have property claims in Croatia are particularly reluctant to surrender their Croatian citizenship, fearing they might forfeit the chance to be compensated for their losses.

Some of the younger Croatian refugees have another reason for not wanting to surrender their Croatian passports for FRY ones. Many want to leave Yugoslavia, and visa-free travel from FRY is not open to the more attractive countries of preferred destination, such as Germany, which does not require visas from persons traveling on Croatian passports.

DOCUMENTS FOR INTERNALLY DISPLACED PEOPLE

Unlike refugees, the people displaced from Kosovo are already Yugoslav citizens. That does not mean, however, that they have no problem with documents. In fact, many of the internally displaced cite lack of residence documents as their chief complaint. Such documents are routinely issued by one's local municipality, and have generally been required for health care, education, driver's licenses, and passports.

In general, people moving from one municipality to another are expected to deregister from the place they are leaving before registering in a new location. This was not possible for people fleeing Kosovo on short notice, however. Retrieving personal documents has been very difficult. In seven Kosovo municipalities, these documents are completely missing.

"Let me be frank," said a man displaced from Suva Reka, now living in the Avala Pension collective center in Belgrade municipality. "Our biggest problem is with documents. We cannot get documents. If an old document expires, we can't renew it. We cannot work. We can't get a driver's license or register our vehicles. If an employer sees we are from Kosovo, he won't give us a job."

The need for documents to gain access to health care was quickly resolved when the Ministry of Health waived the requirement to show such documents. Although the Ministry of Education was slower to respond, it has now allowed displaced children to register for school without the proper residence documents.

REFUGEES AND DISPLACED PEOPLE IN PRIVATE HOMES

Although the overwhelming majority of refugees and internally displaced persons (about 90 percent) are living in private accommodations, the lack of housing—along with the lack of jobs—remains a principal obstacle to local integration. Refugees living in private accommodations divide into three groups:

1) The majority of the refugees and displaced people are living with family or friends, and may or may not be paying rent.

2) Many refugees (fewer among the displaced) have moved out of the homes of family and friends, and are now paying rent. In order to afford to rent, such persons usually have jobs or other sources of income.

3) Finally, a relatively small, but not insignificant, portion of refugees and displaced people live in homes they have constructed themselves. In the case of the internally displaced from Kosovo, some built homes (or partially built them) in Serbia proper prior to their flight.
Although the majority live with relatives and friends, finding and visiting such people is often difficult precisely because they are living in someone else’s home.

USCR was able to visit with one family that appeared to be making the transition from living with relatives to living on their own.

They live in Kursumlija, a municipality bordering Kosovo. USCR met them, not in their home, but in a health clinic where they were bringing a sick child.

Even if the people renting privately are supposedly better off than those in collective centers, it is clear that their existence is also precarious. The father, an economist from Pristina, said that ten of his relatives had been living in the Kursumlija house when his family of six moved in. “The house was not good or bad,” he said. “We could squeeze in.”

Finally, he said, it did get too crowded, and the host family itself moved out. “They are letting us stay alone in the house for free this winter,” he said, suggesting that by spring the relatives will probably expect him to pay. So far, he has no job and no money. “The house is in a remote village, a far distance from school, so the kids don’t go to school. The youngest has the flu. He has lung trouble. I can’t get antibiotics. They wouldn’t be available even if I could afford them.”

The refugees who are able to find work, pay rent, and live in a home not shared with local residents often complain of the high rental costs. USCR met with refugee families renting private homes in the municipality of Kula in the Vojvodina region near the Croatian border. A family of ten is renting a two-room home for 150 DM a month (about $75). The family includes two middle-aged brothers and their father, as well as their wives and children. Although the house appears comfortable and sufficiently equipped, the family expresses worry that they will not have enough firewood to keep it heated through the winter. Its location, far from the nearest school, makes attending classes difficult for the children.

Some refugee families appear virtually indistinguishable from the local community. Another Croatian family in Kula lives in a comfortable home. The man works as a mechanic in a local agricultural firm. After arriving in late 1997 from eastern Slavonia, the family initially moved in with friends in Urbas,
He had a job opportunity in Kula, and moved here. "I've made new friends here. I'd like to stay," he says.

He differs from his neighbors—those who are not also refugees—only by virtue of his background. He had lived in Dvor, the northern part of the Krajina. He worked on the family farm, as well as in a factory, and, as with virtually all men his age, served in the army.

During Operation Storm in 1995, his family was swept into Banja Luka in Serb-controlled Bosnia. From there, the family moved to Bijeljina, also in Republika Srpska. Lacking a job and housing, they didn't stay long, however, moving again, back into the last Serb-controlled part of Croatia, eastern Slavonia. They occupied the abandoned house of an ethnic Hungarian family. There, he worked in a sewing factory. By January 1997, it was clear that eastern Slavonia would revert to Croatian control within a year. The factory collapsed and he and his family moved out. "I guessed that there would be no jobs for Serbs," he said, "and that the Hungarian family would come back to reclaim their home."

PROSPECTS FOR LOCAL INTEGRATION

Assessing realistically their prospects for return or resettlement, many refugees are reconciled to staying in Serbia. Even so, they need help in integrating.

A middle-aged refugee from Croatia in a collective center in Pancevo tells USCR, "I won't return. My house was destroyed. It's not so much a safety issue," he says. "It would be difficult to start from scratch." He adds that his son, who lost a leg in the war, would never go back.

Despite severe unemployment among refugees in Serbia, he thinks he has a better chance here than back in the Krajina. "I can get seasonal agricultural work, some temporary construction work."

He says, "I would prefer to be relocated somewhere else in Serbia where I could have land to build a house and farm."

If he's lucky, he may get his wish. Some refugees have been able to build their own homes. USCR visited with a few of these families both in Montenegro and Vojvodina. In some cases, homes were well furnished with telephones, televisions, refrigerators, etc.

In agriculturally rich Vojvodina, a region bordering Croatia and Hungary with a large concentration of refugees of Croatian origin, some municipalities are cooperating with international humanitarian organizations to provide building materials to refugees who have decided to integrate locally.

The program is open to certain refugees who apply for Yugoslav citizenship. The municipality promises a job to one member of the family and the family members build a home on land provided by the municipality. After they build the house, they are required to turn in their refugee cards, rendering them ineligible for humanitarian assistance. After ten years' occupancy, they will be considered co-owners of the property with the municipality.

Although this is still a modest program, the refugees who participate in it seem to be delighted with the chance to establish new roots, and it appears to provide a good model for others who see no prospects for return. "I am more than happy with this situation," said a refugee from Banovici, Bosnia, who had been living with a private family in Kula municipality since 1992.

ROMA IN SERBIA: A DIFFERENT STORY

Roma (which, for purposes of this paper, include other "Gypsy" groups, such as Hashkalija) were caught in the middle of the ethnic conflict in Kosovo. Neither Serb nor Albanian, the Roma in Kosovo, as elsewhere, tended to adapt to the ethnic group they perceived as dominant, learning that language and trying to accommodate themselves with that group. Kosovo's swift reversal of fortune, therefore, proved disastrous for many of Kosovo's Roma, because the returning ethnic Albanians often perceived them as Serb collaborators.

There are currently between 40,000 and 50,000 displaced Roma in FRY. About 15,000 to 20,000 are in the central and southern areas bordering Kosovo. Another 15,000 are in the Belgrade area. The other 10,000 are living in Montenegro.

Although the ethnic Albanians in Kosovo may have perceived the Roma as being aligned with the Serbs, that has hardly made them welcome to local communities in Serbia. Pre-existing Roma communities in Serbia occupy the lowest rungs of the socioeconomic ladder. They appear at night as street cleaners and live in squalid slums in industrial sectors or in makeshift encampments under bridges or in abandoned buildings. The new arrivals from Kosovo often gravitate to local Roma settlements, making it difficult to distinguish the displaced from the general, and also destitute, Roma communities.
USCR visited a Roma family living in such a pre-existing Roma settlement, a tightly packed ghetto in the Mali Leskovac industrial outskirts of Belgrade. The slum is called “Deponija,” which translates to “garbage dump.” Their home, a small dwelling with concrete walls, a rusted tin roof, and windows made from plastic sheets, is set in a muddy, potholed alley. They borrowed the equivalent of $200 for the deposit on the place, and pay about $25 monthly in rent. They huddle around a stove provided by UNHCR, supplementing their meager diet with staples (flour and oil) provided by the Red Cross, and other humanitarian goods provided by a Roma association. Despite the assistance, a nine-year-old boy is obviously malnourished, looking the size of an American child half that age.

“We owned three large houses in Kosovo in the town of Srbica,” a young man, who heads the household, told USCR. There is no work, no way to earn money to pay the rent, he said. “It takes money to make money.” He added, “There is no glass for the window, no door, no wood for heat, not enough food.”

His elderly father started to say that he was afraid to leave the house. Four days ago, “skinheads” came into the neighborhood and killed a “Shiptar”—the word for an Albanian. The son hushed him, saying, “We don’t want to talk about that. We feel free to walk outside. We have no problems.” Yet, he refused to have his picture taken.

The children speak only Albanian. They can’t go to school now, their father explains, because they don’t speak Serbian. “We have had enough of this misery,” he said. “We want to return to our home in Kosovo.” He showed as much attachment to his home and property in Kosovo as any displaced Serb. He said he would only return to his own home. Nowhere else would do. But, “We will remain here until the army or the police return to Kosovo. Only the Serb police and military would make us feel safe.”

Local municipalities often turn a cold shoulder to the Roma, hoping that if they refuse to provide shelter or assistance, the Roma will move on. USCR saw this situation in Kursumlija, a municipality that borders Kosovo, which has struggled generally with the influx of displaced people. A group of Roma took over a semifinished, large concrete structure in the center of the town.

The building had no windows, not even plastic sheeting to break the gusts of frigid wind whipping...
through. The muddy ground was strewn with litter. A basement with standing water of indeterminate depth appeared to be filled with sewage and trash. An oily liquid dripped from ceilings throughout the structure.

There was no evidence of humanitarian assistance of any kind. The structure teemed with people. Dirty, poorly clothed children crowded about. Each family had fashioned its own living space. Those places protected from the elements had no light.

USCR went into one small space, picked at random. It was dark, dank, and dirty. A woman and three children were huddled by an old stove. She told USCR that her husband had been taken by the KLA on June 15, 1999. They dragged him out of their house in Kosovo Polje, and then set the house on fire. She and her children were still in the house. She turned to what appeared to be a pile of blankets. She lifted the top blanket and exposed a baby of indeterminate age.

The child—scrawny, malnourished—had severe scarring covering her legs. The mother said that the baby had been caught in the burning house. She said that she knew nothing of the whereabouts of her husband. She did not know that the International Committee of the Red Cross has a family tracing service. No one from the Red Cross had been there. She said she believes her husband is dead. She appeared passive, fatalistic, expecting nothing.

ROMA IN MONTENEGRO: YET A DIFFERENT STORY

USCR also visited a large Roma settlement in Montenegro, known as Konik, built on a pre-existing Roma settlement near the garbage dump on the outskirts of the capital, Podgorica. Konik held about 1,600 people in August. No census had been taken, and the count fluctuated daily, but the camp population had reached about 2,800 by December, an average increase of 300 people per month.

Although local officials there were no less unwelcoming toward the Roma, another element had markedly improved their conditions compared with what USCR saw in Serbia: the presence of international NGOs.

USCR participated in a meeting with a group of international NGOs and the mayor of Podgorica. They were having a heated debate about whether or not to construct a water pipe to serve the camp or to keep trucking water in. It was a debate almost unthinkable in the current Serbian context. Who in Serbia would advocate on behalf of the Roma? Who would build and service camps for them despite resistance from local officials? The Roma in Kursumlija were not receiving water, trucked or otherwise.

But in Montenegro the question of how to deliver water was open to debate. No one suggested that piping in water would be difficult. Doing so, however, would suggest another step toward permanency, and the mayor was insistent that the Roma would have to leave, that they must go back to Kosovo. (His unstated concern appeared to be that conditions should not be better in Konik than other places in FRY for fear that this would attract more displaced Roma to the Podgorica area.)

A similar controversy has raged regarding shelter. Italian NGOs (with generous support from an Italian government that does not want the Roma to move on to Italy) built sturdy, high-quality wooden barracks when the influx first started. They were willing to build additional hard-shelter structures for new arrivals. However, the local authorities insisted that the new arrivals be placed in tents. Therefore, NGOs constructed “Konik II,” a tent encampment next to the “Konik I” barracks.

Konik is located in a valley surrounded by hills. Thus, the ground tends to be damp and muddy; high winds funnel down from the hills. Trying to create a more sanitary environment for the tents in Konik II, humanitarian agencies first put down a layer of stone and gravel. Shortly before USCR’s visit, a night of swirling winds blew the tents away. Konik II looked devastated. About 1,000 of its residents abandoned the tent encampment and piled into the barracks and a community center in Konik I, creating overcrowded conditions in any hard-shelter structure. Ironically, except for a handful of UNHCR tents that survived the wind storm, most of the tents that remained standing in Konik II were makeshift ones built in traditional style in the mud. The mud held the poles down in the harsh wind. The tents built on gravel could not be firmly anchored.

Both Konik camps were beset with problems. But international NGOs, UNHCR, and other players, including the municipal authorities, were on hand working to solve them. Nothing comparable currently exists in Serbia to help displaced Roma.

* * *

U.S. Committee for Refugees
Many of the uprooted in Serbia have been displaced multiple times. Among the people recently displaced from Kosovo are thousands who were already refugees from Croatia or Bosnia, known locally as "double refugees." Many had been placed in collective centers in Kosovo, part of Belgrade's effort to alter Kosovo's ethnic demography. Ethnic Albanian nationalists saw the settlement of ethnic Serb refugees in Kosovo as a provocation; they became a target of ethnic Albanian anger. Often, Serbian police or military were quartered in these same collective centers, making the refugees living in them even more vulnerable to attack.

USCR met a middle-aged man and his two daughters in their early twenties in a collective center in Pancevo who, until June, had been living in a collective center in Pristina, the capital of Kosovo. In 1995, they were expelled from Glina in the Krajina region of Croatia. The man's wife suffered serious kidney disease, and the authorities had told the family to take her to the Pristina hospital for treatment. They lived in a collective center in Pristina for four years. The husband found work as a security guard in the same hospital. One of the daughters also found a job there. The wife died in 1997.

"We liked life in Pristina," he said. "We would have stayed there." However, he added, "It was quite dangerous all the years we were in Pristina. The first month that we were there, a grenade was thrown at our collective center."

After the Serb police left in June, and seeing mobs looting in Pristina, he loaded his daughters in a hospital van and fled Kosovo. They went to Belgrade, where they stayed a few days with the man's sister (also a refugee from Croatia). "But she has a small apartment, so we went to the Red Cross in Belgrade. They told us to come here. It was June 25th [1999]."

The daughters have remained quiet, until he says, "I am satisfied here." Then, one daughter says, "I am not satisfied. I cannot find a job. There is nothing to do. I am 21."

He thinks out loud, talking to USCR, but the true audience, now, seems to be his daughter. "I can't see my future, but I hope I will have a good future. I would like to go back to the place where I was born, Glina. But I would need to feel free, I haven't applied to go back. In case all the Krajina refugees go back, I would go back. Otherwise, I know how to wait."

Other refugees who ended up in Kosovo exercised more choice. The government provided job and living incentives to refugees choosing to settle there, and many decided to take advantage of these offers.

USCR visited with a family of "double refugees" now living in Vojvodina. They originated in Sarajevo, which they left in April 1992. Between 1992 and 1995, they lived in Serbia, dependent on humanitarian assistance. "The lack of employment forced us to go to Kosovo," said one of the men. There, he said, refugees were promised jobs and apartments. He became the manager of a textile factory in Istok, a town in western Kosovo. "We had a big apartment. We planned to settle there permanently," he said.

The army withdrew on June 12, 1999. He stayed another three days. The man said that about 20,000 Serbs had been living in Istok. He said that 14 Serbs decided to stay. "They have all been killed," he said. "My factory was demolished. All the Serb houses, about 3,000, were burned."

He spoke of the high school principal, named Pumalovic, who had safeguarded an Albanian house during the exodus of ethnic Albanians and who thought he and his wife would be safe. "When the KLA came to Istok, they slit his throat and put his body in the town square. He and his wife were both killed."

"The Italians [KFOR troops] told us that they couldn't guarantee our safety and that we should all group together in one place. We decided to leave."
Relatively few refugees from Bosnia and Croatia have been resettled from Serbia to third countries. Since 1992, about 15,000 refugees have been resettled out of UNHCR’s Belgrade office in FRY.

Under the current procedures, to be considered for U.S. resettlement, the principal applicant of a family must first establish his or her refugee claim. In the FRY context, this means that the person has fled from another country, almost always Bosnia or Croatia; internally displaced people from Kosovo are not eligible.

The United States resettled 2,149 refugees from FRY in 1999, fewer than anticipated. During the first four months of 1999, UNHCR conducted no status determination interviews because of the emergency. At that time, UNHCR and the International Organization for Migration (IOM) were able to move some refugees already in the resettlement pipeline via Hungary. Since then, however, the process of interviewing and moving refugees has become more complicated.

Because the United States and FRY have severed diplomatic relations, U.S. officials no longer conduct refugee status interviews in Serbia or Montenegro. As before, however, IOM prepares cases for the U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS). Now, the INS interviews take place just across the border, in Timisoara, Romania, and refugees approved by the INS for U.S. resettlement fly to the United States from there. By the end of 1999, UNHCR and IOM had arranged for about 4,000 resettlement interviews in Timisoara.

During 1999 and into 2000, all candidates for U.S. resettlement have had to be referred by UNHCR. In doing so, UNHCR follows strict U.S. government criteria for “priority one” (P-1) cases. These are cases of compelling concern, such as torture victims, persons at risk of refoulement—forced return—or otherwise in danger in their first asylum country, and persons in urgent need of medical care.

Once a refugee leaves Serbia under UNHCR’s auspices, the governments of FRY and Romania consider him or her to be wholly UNHCR’s responsibility. Romania will not allow refugees to remain, nor will Serbia allow them to return. If, for any reason, the INS rejects the applicant, UNHCR is duty bound to find another country willing to resettle the refugee. Places are not readily available, and other countries—the Nordics, in particular, which are usually generous in offering resettlement places—are sensitive about serving as a back up for cases rejected by the United States.

Since the bombing campaign, the U.S. program has largely been confined to two groups of refugees. The first group, most of whom originally fled from the Krajina region of Croatia in 1995, are “double refugees” (see box, p. 15). In 1995, the FRY authorities placed thousands of newly arriving refugees in Kosovo, putting about 14,000 of them in collective centers, in an effort to alter the demographic composition of Kosovo by introducing more ethnic Serbs into the province. Many of the refugees living in these collective centers were in grave danger when tensions and violence escalated in 1998 and 1999. UNHCR and the U.S. government had already identified them as being in need of resettlement before all but about 600 of them fled from Kosovo following the entry of KFOR and the return of the ethnic Albanian refugees.
The others still being resettled in the United States are ethnic Serb refugees originating from the Bosnian Federation, the predominantly Muslim and Croat part of Bosnia, who meet the criteria established as priority two (P-2) by the U.S. government (including former detainees, members of ethnically mixed marriages, victims of torture, and surviving spouses of persons killed in detention) but whom UNHCR has upgraded to P-1 status. UNHCR has “converted” about 20 percent of the existing P-2 caseload into the P-1 category.

In theory, a third group would be eligible: refugees originating from Bosnia who have close relatives from the United States (spouses, unmarried children, and parents) who submit Affidavits of Relationship (AORs) on their behalf. However, because no refugee processing post exists within the FRY and because UNHCR is unwilling to be responsible for non-P-1 cases in Romania, potential priority three (P-3) cases (like P-2 cases) cannot gain access to the system. As of April 1, 2000, the U.S. government discontinued P-3 processing for Bosnians.

Because UNHCR considers those persons who arrive from Muslim or Croat-controlled regions of Bosnia and Croatia as prima facie refugees, its protection officers do not conduct individual refugee status determination interviews. However, if making a P-1 resettlement referral, they must do so. Before referring such cases to the INS in Romania, UNHCR must also be virtually certain that the INS will agree with its assessment and grant the case. Consequently, UNHCR has converted relatively few P-2 or P-3 refugee cases into P-1s.

**HUMANITARIAN ASSISTANCE PIPELINE**

The existing network for distributing humanitarian aid in the FRY operates almost exclusively through the Yugoslav Red Cross (YRC). The Red Cross system has had a virtual monopoly, and no other agency comes close to it in terms of a national network for aid distribution, particularly at the local level.

When the new influx from Kosovo erupted in the summer, the YRC did not have the capacity to deliver humanitarian assistance. Through the help of international agencies, including the International Federation of the Red Cross (IFRC), the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), UNHCR, and WFP, it significantly improved its capacity to deliver aid. From delivering 3,000 metric tons of aid in August, the Yugoslav Red Cross delivered 20,000 metric tons in November, and plans to continue at that level through 2000.

Nevertheless, the Yugoslav Red Cross has proven controversial. During the conflict in Kosovo, it was exclusively associated with the Serb community. Its critics have accused it of wrongful conduct, from corruption to participation in ethnic cleansing. Its defenders in Serbia say it is the only effective humanitarian organization capable of delivering the quantity of assistance demanded by the humanitarian needs of the country.

In late 1999, allegations surfaced that the YRC branch in Zemun, a Belgrade municipality, had diverted hygiene packets and rice intended for refugees. The European Community Humanitarian Office (ECHO) and IFRC investigators confirmed the allegations.

As it turned out, however, the diversion was neither surreptitious nor for profit in the local market. The board of the Zemun Red Cross branch voted on October 18 to make a one-time grant of hygiene parcels and rice intended for refugees. The European Community Humanitarian Office (ECHO) and IFRC investigators confirmed the allegations.

According to the local Red Cross branch, the school employees had not been paid since May 1999. The schools are used for distributing aid to its beneficiary lists. Additional parcels were distributed to 250 employees of the “Teleoptik” factory in Zemun and to 300 employees of a shoe factory there. The Red Cross reportedly used warehouses located at both factories to store humanitarian assistance.

ECHO visited 13 Red Cross branches in the Belgrade area, and found that similar diversion had occurred in 8 of the 13. This suggests that the problem is systemic and not limited to Zemun. All branches in question were temporarily closed, according to ECHO.

The Yugoslav Red Cross has agreed, in principle, to an independent audit.

In a December 2 memo to all Red Cross municipal branch offices, the Secretary General of the Yugoslav Red Cross, Dr. Rade Dubajic, summarized the YRC executive board’s November 25 decisions. On the one hand, the board stated that “aid cannot be distributed to persons who do not fit the criteria.” It said, “We have received some serious complaints by the donors in regard to the obvious cases of disrespecting the set criteria in certain municipal Red Cross branches and distributing the assistance to the people that cannot be the beneficiaries of the international humanitarian aid.”

On the other hand, the same memorandum directed local branches not to cooperate with “interna-
Although the purpose of USCR’s visit was not to assess the extent of bomb damage on civilian, and particularly refugee, populations, there were constant reminders.

UNHCR’s own local staff, many of whom are themselves refugees from Croatia, were distraught during the bombing campaign that their headquarters in Geneva declined to protest when refugee collective centers were hit. USCR visited several collective centers that had allegedly sustained damage as a result of NATO bombing. In Subotica, a municipality in Vojvodina, USCR saw a muddy, dismal collective center constructed from old, rusted metal containers. The center was hit during NATO bombing, killing one refugee. Local officials said there were no military sites anywhere near the camp, though a weather station in the vicinity may have been a target. At the time of the bombing, the center held 120 refugees, mostly from the Krajina. At the time of USCR’s visit, it held only 45.

In Novi Pazar in the largely Muslim Sandjak region, USCR visited a downtown collective center, a former school, that had sustained bomb damage. An elderly resident of the shelter said that he was lying on his cot one evening when the roof suddenly fell in on top of him. He was not seriously hurt. The roof is still damaged. Ceiling tiles hang loosely over the living space. Gaping holes in walls and blown out windows are in evidence. A military barracks used to be on a hill across the street. Some 60 bombs reportedly fell in the area, including on a nearby residential building, killing 15 people.

Other collective centers built on or near the grounds of targeted factories (see the Smederevo center, p. 7) were curiously spared. Although some sustained minor damage, most were not hit. In Pancevo, an industrial center in Vojvodina, a collective center is located on the grounds of an oil refinery that was heavily bombed. USCR stood on the grounds of the collective center; from that vantage point, the center appears to be surrounded by structures that look like targets of the bomb campaign, yet the collective center itself was untouched. The center, comprised of workers’ barracks, holds 43 refugees, mostly people from the Krajina towns of Glina, Petrinja, and Knin who arrived in 1995. Each family has fashioned its own separate living space.

The ground is muddy. Firewood is stacked about. The families are out, in a holiday mood, carving up a recently slaughtered pig swinging from a makeshift meat hanger. A middle-aged man invites USCR into his home, two small rooms carved out of the barracks.

He has little to say about the bombing. His concerns are more immediate. He worries whether they will have enough firewood to last the winter because he thinks the electricity will soon be cut off. They also lack winter clothes and shoes, he says.

A local UNHCR worker tells his own story. A refugee from the Krajina, an ethnic Serb, he is married to an ethnic Croat, and says he never had any nationalist sentiments. However, when living in Knin (where he worked for UNHCR), he was attacked in the street and beaten. He lost everything when he was expelled from Croatia. He continued working for UNHCR in Kosovo, where he helped ethnic Albanian refugees, at times at great personal risk. He was in Kosovo working for UNHCR during the bombing campaign. His elderly mother was alone in a high rise in Belgrade. When the bombing started, she had been in the bathroom. Hurrying to get to the basement, she slipped on the bathroom floor and broke her hip.

She suffered great pain, did not have adequate medical treatment, and several months later, died. “She will never be listed as a casualty of the war,” he said, “but I believe she was killed by NATO bombing.”

He is a dedicated humanitarian worker, but he is also bitter. “I never believed in politics,” he said. “Political parties have ruined my life. My mother lost her family to the Ustache [the Croatian puppet regime aligned with the Nazis], and this is the way she ends her life.”
tional humanitarian organizations” in their monitoring
efforts. It prohibited international humanitarian orga-
nizations from obtaining lists of beneficiaries, from
meeting with municipal Red Cross branches without
prior YRC permission, and prohibited local branches
from filling out forms or questionnaires from interna-
tional humanitarian organizations without consulting
the Yugoslav Red Cross or the Serbian Red Cross.

In December 1999, the U.S. government re-
stricted its humanitarian funding in FRY to ensure that
U.S. funds do not directly or indirectly support the
Milosevic regime. The earmark specifically prohibits
U.S. funds from being used to support activities and
operations of the Yugoslav Red Cross or the Serbian
Commissioner for Refugees (the government refugee
agency) without congressional notification. This meant
that UNHCR’s FRY budget would be reduced by 20
percent—that part of its costs particularly associated
with renting socially owned collective centers, as well
as its more limited use of the Yugoslav Red Cross in
distribution of non-food items. The World Food
Program, on the other hand, uses the Yugoslav Red
Cross for 100 percent of its food warehousing and
distribution, and the IFRC and ICRC are similarly tied
to the Yugoslav Red Cross as their local partner.
Although the U.S. Agency for International Develop-
ment (AID) funds food assistance elsewhere in the
Balkans, it has cut its funding of the World Food
Program in the FRY entirely.

U.S. bilateral assistance is to be directed to
international NGOs with the intention of creating an
alternative network for distributing humanitarian as-
sistance. The U.S. government is encouraging part-
nerships with UNHCR that can distribute directly to
beneficiaries.

ALTERNATIVE DISTRIBUTION
NETWORKS?

During its visit, USCR examined the capacity of
NGOs in Serbia to develop alternative distribution
avenues. USCR met with international NGOs al-
ready operating in Serbia, including Caritas, CARE,
International Orthodox Christian Charities (IOCC,
which works with the Serbian Orthodox Church), the
International Rescue Committee, and Catholic Relief
Services (CRS). All showed potential for increased
involvement, depending on donor interest. Some of
the NGOs have run major humanitarian assistance
operations in Kosovo that could be replicated in Serbia
proper. Thus far, however, none has developed a
network that could effectively reach beneficiaries
nationwide.

Such international NGOs could coordinate
their activities, however, and provide direct assistance
to collective centers. But, in the short term at least,
young could not reach most of the refugees and dis-
placed persons in private accommodations without
using local Red Cross branches. They would also have
difficulty finding and renting appropriate warehouse
space. Clearly, the cheapest avenue is to rent space
from “socially owned” rather than the more expensive
private facilities. But this presents another roadblock.
If an international NGO locates a cheaper “socially
owned” rather than private warehouse, it faces the
same Catch-22 UNHCR has had with paying “rents” to
socially owned collective centers: such money ulti-
mately reaches the coffers of the government and other
elites closely tied to the Milosevic regime.

Despite problems associated with some local
Red Cross branches, USCR found that the local
branches often operate independently from central
authorities and seem to have good rapport with the
local beneficiary populations. USCR visited key op-
position municipalities in various parts of the coun-
try—Kraljevo, Nis, Cacak, Novi Pazar, Sombor—and
found that all had good relations with their local Red
Cross branches. Although opposition municipality
officials complained about the higher echelons of the
Yugoslav and Serbian Red Cross, they had only praise
for the local branches, and interacted collegially with
them.

Most often, local opposition officials com-
plained of government level actions. For example,
Sombor, an opposition municipality in Vojvodina
bordering Croatia, has attempted a local integration
project to help refugees construct private homes. But
Sombor has received no support for infrastructure
development, roads, water lines, sewage, or electricity
from the federal Yugoslav or Serb republic authorities
to support this initiative.

Despite other problems opposition munici-
palities face, USCR found no substantiation of the
charges that food and humanitarian assistance per se
are being manipulated to deny such aid to needy
populations in these municipalities or, conversely, to
direct the aid into opposition municipalities in order
to draw more uprooted people into them.

* * *
While the international community, including the U.S. government, has good reason to isolate the Milosevic regime, it also needs to recognize that isolating the Serbian people hurts the most vulnerable elements of its society, including the elderly, people with disabilities, refugees, and displaced people. Weakening the weakest elements of this society does not necessarily weaken the regime. Paradoxically, it might even strengthen Milosevic's hand, giving him a convenient scapegoat for the many ills confronting Serbia.

Humanitarian assistance, therefore, has a direct benefit in keeping people from hunger, disease, and exposure, as well as an indirect political benefit in making the society more open. The contrast between Serbia and Montenegro helps to illustrate this. International NGOs play an active role in Montenegro, bringing direct benefits as the deliverers of humanitarian assistance. But they also bring that nettlesome, but oh-so-healthy trait peculiar to NGOs—advocacy.

Serbia is not monolithic. International NGOs will find local partners, many already active but in need of international support and resources. Together, they might help build a more tolerant and committed civil society. But NGOs will also need to tread carefully. There is heightened sensitivity right now in Serbia toward the international community. Serbs feel stigmatized, misunderstood, resentful. These are sentiments expressed among the refugees and the displaced, as well as in the local community. If NGOs do their job right, they will reduce xenophobia and establish inroads of understanding.

Political changes in Croatia suggest that it is too early to give up on repatriation. Nevertheless, the most likely outcome for the overwhelming majority of refugees and displaced people is local integration, not return to Bosnia, Croatia, or Kosovo.

International humanitarian agencies and NGOs should recognize that most refugees and displaced people will remain in Serbia and Montenegro, and should work to facilitate their local integration. Integrating refugees and displaced people assumes that there is an economy and a society capable of absorbing them. Given the international economic sanctions on Serbia, direct reconstruction and rehabilitation of the country's economic infrastructure appear not to be an option. However, at the micro-level, even at the municipal level, the limits of the sanctions should be tested. It is an ancient axiom of charitable giving that it is better to give a man a portion of a field to till himself than to give him food outright. Continuing to provide only basic humanitarian goods to refugees and displaced people might keep them from becoming cold, malnourished, and ill (all good things), but, after a time, it also breeds dependency, passivity, and hopelessness. The international community needs to think about, and work toward real and sustainable solutions. With some important exceptions, focusing on local integration would be the most realistic, cost effective, and beneficial approach for most refugees and internally displaced people. If helping them to integrate in Serbia and Montenegro also helps their larger society to heal, so be it.

I. Humanitarian Assistance

A) Donors should direct bilateral funding to nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) to develop alternative networks to deliver humanitarian aid in Serbia.

The U.S. government, the European Community Humanitarian Organization (ECHO), and other donors should encourage NGOs to develop partnerships inside Serbia, as well as Montenegro, for delivering humanitarian aid. Breaking the Yugoslav Red Cross's monopoly will create healthy competition and make the YRC more accountable.

B) The U.S. government and ECHO should establish a set of conditions that the Serbian Commissioner for Refugees (the government entity) and the Yugoslav Red Cross need to meet in order for donors to restore, or continue, multilateral aid funding that involves the Yugoslav Red Cross.

These conditions (agreed to in principle but not fully implemented) should include:

1) The successful completion of a full, independent audit by international auditors of the Yugoslav Red Cross, the Serbian Red Cross,
and local Red Cross branch offices in the Serbian Republic. The audit should not be limited to specific allegations that have already been raised. The audit should include an examination of the beneficiary lists to ensure that the lists are accurate and that beneficiaries meet the stated criteria for receiving aid.

2) A full and complete registration of internally displaced persons and refugees. The registration exercise should be independently funded and conducted jointly by Red Cross and UNHCR field staff, supervised by UNHCR and monitored by the Swiss government.

3) Ongoing access for international monitors at all levels of Yugoslav Red Cross operations.

4) Accurate and complete lists of registered refugees, internally displaced persons, and other aid beneficiaries to UNHCR, ICRC, IFRC, ECHO, and WFP, updated regularly.

5) A legal framework for the work of international NGOs in FRY, allowing NGOs to import the finances, goods, and services needed to provide humanitarian aid without interference.

6) Direct access for international NGOs, operating as implementing partners of recognized donors and international humanitarian organizations, to beneficiary populations.

C) The World Food Program and other international humanitarian agencies that use YRC warehouses and delivery systems should reassess quarterly the fees that the Yugoslav Red Cross charges for distribution and warehousing, and seek to reduce those fees to the actual costs.

The World Food Program reports that the $70 flat-rate fee per ton of humanitarian assistance the Yugoslav Red Cross charged until recently has been cut to $64, but that it could (and should) be cut further. Economies of scale suggest that per-ton rates should be reduced as the quantity increases.

D) UNHCR should more strictly and systematically monitor the fee it pays to the Serbian Commissioner for Refugees for the cost of running collective centers to ensure that payments made at the federal and republic level actually reflect real costs and that the authorities allocate these fairly to those who administer the collective centers locally.

UNHCR should minimize expending any funds that are not used for expressly humanitarian purposes directly related to the running costs of the collective centers themselves and basic assistance for collective center residents. Currently, UNHCR bases its payments on a formula of 70 cents per day per refugee or displaced person in a collective center. This amounts to about $10 million annually to support refugees and displaced persons in more than 600 collective centers. UNHCR field offices in Serbia need to monitor these payments carefully to ensure that collective center residents in fact receive assistance that is consistent with such funds and that the central authorities allocate these payments regularly and without discrimination based on the actual number of residents in particular localities.

Ultimately, UNHCR has no choice but to work with the governing authorities in Serbia if it is to serve 40,000 of the most vulnerable refugees and displaced people who comprise the collective center population. UNHCR's involvement is essential to ensure that this vulnerable population is cared for appropriately, and not subject to manipulation.

E) UNHCR should earmark a portion of its fee to the Serbian government for collective center support to reflect the number of internally displaced Roma who live in “unofficial” collective centers.

With no support from Serbian authorities at the municipal, republic, or federal level, displaced Roma from Kosovo are squatting in abandoned buildings and other sites—“unofficial” collective centers. After UNHCR conducts its census of the refugee and displaced population in Serbia, it should demand equal treatment for displaced Roma. The Roma cannot remain invisible and unassisted. They must be counted, acknowledged, and helped. UNHCR needs to use every carrot and stick at its disposal to pressure the authorities to assist them. International NGOs seeking to work in Serbia should also focus their attention on this vulnerable population.
II. Protection/Durable Solutions

A) Serbia should amend its refugee law (April 1992) and Montenegro should amend its Order on Displaced Persons (July 1992) to include in law the principle of nonrefoulement (prohibiting forced return of refugees).

Serbia and Montenegro should formally commit themselves not to return refugees to persecution. (This is a key provision of the 1951 Refugee Convention, which the SFRY ratified, and to which the FRY is bound. The nonrefoulement provision, however, has not been incorporated explicitly in domestic legislation.) They should introduce companion legislation on internal displacement. These laws should include a parallel provision prohibiting the return of an internally displaced person to a place where he or she would be persecuted.

B) Donors should support local integration projects that work directly with local municipalities in Serbia and Montenegro.

Although prospects for repatriation to Croatia have improved since the election of Stipe Mesic as president, it remains unlikely that most refugees and displaced people will return to their original homes in Bosnia, Croatia, and Kosovo. Local municipalities in Serbia and Montenegro should be encouraged to integrate them, helping them become contributing members of their communities. UNHCR and NGOs, if adequately funded, have been able to enter into agreements with certain municipalities whereby the municipality provides land, primary infrastructure (such as roads, sewage and water lines), and a job to a refugee family. In return, UNHCR and its implementing NGO partners provide building materials for self-help construction of homes, secondary infrastructure, farming equipment, and other transitional assistance. Although initially expensive, such projects create self-sufficiency, productivity, and stability.

C) The United States should institute refugee processing out of Podgorica, Montenegro.

Among the hundreds of thousands of refugees and internally displaced persons in Serbia and Montenegro, there are smaller subgroups who can neither integrate locally nor return to their places of origin. Ordinarily, such persons might be considered for resettlement to third countries. However, refugees are currently caught in a bottleneck because the United States and other key resettlement countries have severed diplomatic relations with the FRY. Refugee processing is limited to a relatively few highly selective cases whom UNHCR is willing to transport to Romania for their resettlement interviews.

Establishing a refugee processing post in Montenegro would solve this problem. Prospective applicants from Serbia would be able to cross into Montenegro without having to obtain a visa, since Montenegro is still officially part of the FRY. Transporting recognized refugees in Montenegro via Croatia would be relatively easy. A nongovernmental organization in Podgorica could prepare cases just as IOM does in Belgrade. INS officers could conduct circuit rides to Montenegro where they would conduct interviews. Montenegro would be safe and relatively friendly toward U.S. officials.

There are precedents for this: in both Vietnam and Cuba, in the absence of diplomatic relations, the INS has conducted refugee status interviews. This would introduce much-needed flexibility into the program. Not only would it enable UNHCR to refer cases, but it would also allow a JVA to generate cases by making an initial assessment that an applicant meets the U.S. government’s P-2 or P-3 criteria.

The most important advantage of processing out of Montenegro is that the INS would have the flexibility to reject cases without creating a demand that UNHCR seek other countries to resettle rejected cases. This would give UNHCR greater latitude to refer cases that it is not absolutely convinced the INS will accept, avoiding the present problem in Romania where it is seeking a 100 percent approval rate (the approval rate currently stands at 98 percent).

D) President Clinton should issue a presidential determination permitting the United States to admit certain categories of internally displaced persons in FRY as refugees for purposes of the U.S. resettlement program.
Most of the newly vulnerable groups in the Balkans are displaced internally, and, thus far, UNHCR has not interpreted its guidelines on internally displaced people to include referring them to third countries for resettlement.

The Refugee Act of 1980 allows the United States to accept as refugees people departing directly from their country of origin. This requires a presidential determination and has been used to admit as refugees people arriving directly from Vietnam, Cuba, and the former Soviet Union, among others.

In many respects, persons fleeing from Kosovo to Serbia proper appear more like refugees than internally displaced people. Kosovo is presently outside the control and jurisdiction of the central authorities in Belgrade. It is ruled by the International UNMIK (UN Mission in Kosovo) administration and de facto by ethnic Albanian authorities. Although in the abstract Kosovo is still under FYR’s sovereignty, this distinction is likely to have no meaning on the ground for the foreseeable future. In effect, Serbia and Montenegro function very much like countries of first asylum for persons seeking refuge from Kosovo. If such asylum seekers are unwelcome in Serbia and Montenegro, few other options are currently available to them. Because of this reality, and because displaced persons who have fled from Kosovo to Serbia proper or Montenegro would have a well-founded fear of persecution if returned to Kosovo, internally displaced people fleeing from Kosovo ought to be considered refugees for purposes of the U.S. resettlement program.

E) To facilitate the processing of refugees of special humanitarian concern to the United States, the U.S. government ought to expand P-2 criteria to include refugees from Croatia who meet the same criteria that now apply for P-2 category refugees from Bosnia.

Such a P-2 (groups of special concern) category would include: former detainees who were held on account of ethnicity, religion, or political opinion; persons in ethnically mixed marriages; victims of torture or systematic and significant acts of violence against members of targeted ethnic groups by governmental authorities or quasi-governmental authorities in areas under their control; and surviving spouses of civilians who would have been eligible under these criteria if their spouses had not died in detention or been killed as a result of torture or violence.

F) The United States should also provide P-3 processing for refugees from Croatia.

Although P-3 (family reunification) processing expires for refugees from Bosnia on April 1, 2000, such refugee families have had several years to find each other and reunify through the U.S. program. Many refugees from Croatia are similarly split and should be given the same chance to reunify.

The P-3 designation should be of limited duration, perhaps one year, to capture compelling cases that have not previously qualified, but not to drag on and risk turning a refugee family reunification program into a family-based immigration program.

G) The U.S. government should consider creating a P-2 category for “double refugees” who had resided in collective centers in Kosovo.

Many of the uprooted in Serbia have been displaced multiple times. Among the people recently displaced from Kosovo are thousands who were already refugees from Croatia or Bosnia, known locally as “double refugees.” Many had been placed in collective centers in Kosovo, part of Belgrade’s effort to alter Kosovo’s ethnic demography. Ethnic Albanian nationalists saw the settlement of ethnic Serb refugees in Kosovo as a provocation; they became a target of ethnic Albanian anger. Often, Serbian police or military were quartered in these same collective centers, making the refugees living in them even more vulnerable to attack.

The P-2 criteria for double refugees should be limited to those who resided in collective centers in Kosovo and who left Kosovo in 1999. There are other refugees who chose to live in Kosovo, had good jobs there and nice houses. Generally, such people have more resources and less need for resettlement.

H) The following vulnerable groups who are unable to integrate locally in the area of first asylum and who cannot return to their places of origin on account of a well-founded fear of persecution should be considered for the U.S. resettlement program:
1) Albanian-speaking Roma and Hashkalija ("Gypsies") who fled from Kosovo to Serbia proper, Montenegro, or Macedonia. Roma, and other "Gypsy" subgroups such as Hashkalija, have been particularly scapegoated, accused by ethnic Albanian nationalists as having collaborated with the Serbian regime that controlled Kosovo until June 1999. In many cases, they have experienced severe persecution. Some do not speak Serbian, making their integration in Serbia or Montenegro all the more difficult, and making it impossible for their already disadvantaged children to go to school. Contrary to popular belief that all Roma are nomadic, most of the Roma living in Kosovo were homeowners.

2) Ethnic Albanians from Kosovo (and predominantly ethnic Albanian parts of southern Serbia, such as Presevo) who are accused of being collaborators with the Serbs. A relatively small number of ethnic Albanians fled Kosovo because of threats or persecution at the hands of ethnic Albanian nationalists who accuse them of collaborating with the Serbian regime ruling Kosovo until June 1999. As ethnic Albanians, they are not welcome in Serbia or Montenegro, and have no opportunity for meaningful integration.

More recently, some ethnic Albanians in heavily ethnic Albanian municipalities in southern Serbia, such as Presevo, have also been threatened as collaborators, and forced to flee.

3) Serbian draft evaders or deserters who had a conscientious objection to serving in Kosovo. Thousands of Serbian draft evaders and deserters live in precarious conditions, mostly along the Hungarian border, as well as in Montenegro, Macedonia, and in other parts of Europe. There is no amnesty on their behalf, and some have been arrested, tried, and sentenced to five-year prison terms, a very harsh penalty.

The UN Handbook on Procedures and Criteria for Determining Refugee Status says that “where...the type of military action...is condemned by the international community as contrary to basic rules of human conduct, punishment for desertion or draft evasion could...in itself be regarded as persecution.”

Because the international community condemned the Yugoslav army’s actions in Kosovo, objectors to serving with that army in Kosovo appear to meet the criteria set forth in UNHCR’s Handbook.

Special consideration for resettlement could be given to refugees from Croatia or Bosnia who refused to be conscripted into the Yugoslav army to fight in Kosovo.

4) Gorani, Slavic Muslims who fled Kosovo into Serbia proper or Montenegro. This group of about 20,000 are continuing to leave Kosovo. They speak a closely related Slavic dialect to Serbian, making them stand out in Albanian-speaking Kosovo. Gorani living outside areas of Gorani concentration have become internally displaced within Kosovo into the areas where they still represent a majority. It is not clear whether those who have fled to the Sandjak region of Serbia and Montenegro (which is predominantly Slavic Muslim) will be tolerated there.

5) The refugees who continue to live in collective centers in Kosovo.

An estimated 600 refugees are believed still to reside in collective centers in Kosovo. Their safety, health, and welfare could be assessed, and those expressing an interest in resettlement could be evacuated from Kosovo and resettled to the United States or another third country.

6) Members of Albanian-Serbian mixed marriages.

This is probably an extremely small minority. However, persons in such marriages would have obvious difficulty living in either Kosovo or Serbia proper.

7) Ethnic Albanians from Serbia proper (mostly Presevo) who have fled into Macedonia.

These are classic refugees with a well-founded fear of persecution fleeing an international border who are not welcome in the country of first asylum.

8) Other ethnic and religious minorities from Kosovo.

As stepped-up repression of the Gorani indicates, even groups that are not accused of collaboration with the Serbs are now under threat in Kosovo. Jews, Turks, "Egyptians" (a subgroup of “Gypsies” who reject the name “Roma” saying they originate from Egypt), and other small minority groups could be considered for resettlement.