

WORLD & NATION

Catholic relief agencies take lead in Kosovo crisis

By John Thavis
Catholic News Service

SKOPJE, Macedonia — The magnitude of the Kosovar refugee crisis shocked the world and caught international aid agencies off-guard, but Catholic organizations were among the first to respond with help.

In a region where the Catholic Church is a small minority, its relief structure suddenly found itself in the front lines of an effort to feed, clothe and assist some 300,000 Kosovar refugees who landed in Albania and Macedonia in late March.

Catholic Relief Services, the U.S. bishops' international relief and development agency, led the way, beefing up staff throughout the region and delivering crucial supplies to refugees caught in a no-man's land on the Macedonian border and in the northern Albanian city of Kukes.

In early April, Albanian Archbishop Rrok Mirdita of Durres-Tirana welcomed the first of four emergency airlifts from Caritas Croatia and aid from Caritas Italy, while Caritas Austria shipped 10,000 blankets and 400 tents to Macedonia.

The British-based Catholic Fund for Overseas Development, the official aid agency of the Catholic bishops of England and Wales, immediately diverted funds from its regular Albanian programs to finance delivery of urgently needed food, blankets and utensils to refugee centers throughout the country.

The Geneva-based International Catholic Migration Commission provided special assistance to the most vulnerable of the refugee population in Macedonia.

Church agencies were able to respond so effectively to the refugee explosion because they have been in place for many years in the Balkans — and they plan to be there long after the attention of media and other relief organizations has shifted from the current crisis.

That is one reason why CRS agreed in mid-April to take over management of the biggest refugee camp in the region, near the Brazda in northern Macedonia.

"We're in it to stay, even though we know there's never been a camp where there haven't been huge problems as time goes on. But we're planning on being with these people back in Kosovo some day, so we should be here with them now," said David



An ethnic Albanian man reaches out for bread during a rush for food at the refugee camp in Kukes, Albania, April 12. About 300,000 people from the Yugoslavian province of Kosovo have fled to neighboring Albania.

Holdridge, a CRS regional director.

When the crisis hit, he said, "we rallied around very quickly. I think we've done a better job than most because we have a network of 14 offices in the region."

David Snyder, a CRS media liaison in the Balkans, said when some 40,000 Kosovars crossed into Macedonia in early April to a now-vacant camp at Blace, CRS was the only nongovernmental agency distributing relief at the border, partly because its office in Macedonia had foreseen an influx there.

He said CRS, using tractors supplied and manned by a local Muslim relief organization, was able to send in load after load of supplies to Blace. It was a lifeline that other aid organizations were simply not positioned to provide. In an ironic and sad twist, CRS also discovered that some of its staff members from Kosovo were showing up in refugee camps.

"It's been very difficult for the staff to see CRS people in the camps and not be able to get them out," said Phil Oldham, who heads the CRS office in Albania. About half the CRS staff in Kosovo remained unaccounted for.

Along with immediate relief, other church experts were planning for long-term refugee problems.

Lacy Wright, policy adviser for the U.S. Catholic Conference's Migration and Refugee Services, was gathering information in Macedonia and Albania on the possible scenarios for the 300,000 Kosovar refugees.

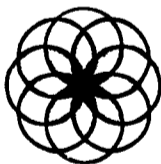
One issue was the widely different fates awaiting Kosovars who crossed into Albania, many of whom were settled with local families, and those who received a much cooler welcome in Macedonia and were being shuttled to other countries.

Dale Buscher, head of the International Catholic Migration Commission in Geneva, said his organization was looking into refugee rights protection, along with job-creation, skills programs and counseling.

"We're looking at their needs right now, and also trying to see what their needs will be if a return (to Kosovo) is possible, to help them restart their lives," Buscher said.

"For the meantime, we want to help these people be productive members of their camps, not just passive recipients of aid," he said.

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All the church aid workers said the Catholic nature of their programs was important to them, but less so to the relief recipients.

"Many times our church status gives us access to places where government agencies have problems operating. But most refugees here don't know that a Catholic organization is involved. There's little time to talk about that," said CRS' Snyder.

In times of humanitarian crisis, much relief agency work includes logistics. The CRS offices in Tirana resembled a war room, with boards tracking refugee flow from the North, the arrival of food supplies, transportation contracts and local purchase orders. Working by walkie-talkie and cell phone in a country where phone communications is weak at best, the CRS Albania staff had to deal constantly with seemingly minor problems that can derail relief: a late truck, a loading palette left on a runway or a shipment manifest that was never faxed.

Given the human suffering and the logistical challenges, nerves get frayed among relief workers. CRS in Macedonia pulled in a consultant to address that issue, said Jessica Pearl, a liaison officer there.

"A lot of it is self-management; knowing when to say: 'OK, I'm done, I need to go home and sleep.' And we do look out for our colleagues and tell them when it's time to take a break," she said.

Although the stress is heavy, the rewards can be deeply satisfying.

Thanks in part to CRS, refugees were moved from the appalling Blace camp on the Macedonian border to three new facilities, where they enjoyed a basic standard of food, water and hygiene.

"It was an amazing transformation," said Snyder. "One day they were living in near-disaster, and the next day they were eating chicken roasted by an English cook."

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