

The Metropolis Observed

Bless This Mess

residences

Kosovo refugees return to their old neighborhood in search of a place called home.

To those unfamiliar with the Balkans, Hyla Gashi sounds like she has a split personality. "My house is like a jail. I can't leave, and I hate that," she says as she serves coffee to guests in her five-room apartment. "I want to be here. This is my home."

People throughout the war-torn Balkans are enduring extraordinary circumstances to finally live in their homes again. But these dwellings are often not, literally or figuratively, the safe havens they were created to be. They are partially gutted by bombs or scarred by memories of rapes and murders committed within their walls. And their inhabitants are the lucky ones. Often people can't return because their homes are destroyed, occupied by refugees, or on the wrong side of the ethnic divide.

In the segregated Kosovar city of Mitrovica, ethnic Albanians like the Gashis are moving back into their old apartments on the Serbian side of town. But those who return to their flats are sacrificing freedom of movement to live in a perversion of what a neighborhood should be. The security in their three-tower apartment complex is on steroids—the international community's attempt to create (some would say impose) a multiethnic society. Welcome to a Balkan-style gated community: the school bus is an armored personnel carrier, the doorman is a soldier, the patrol

car is a tank, and the fence is barbed wire.

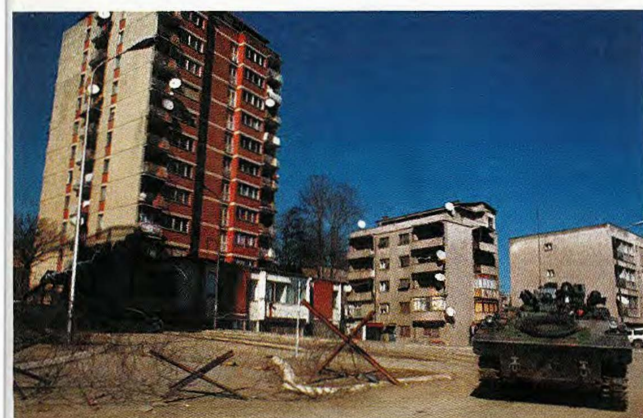
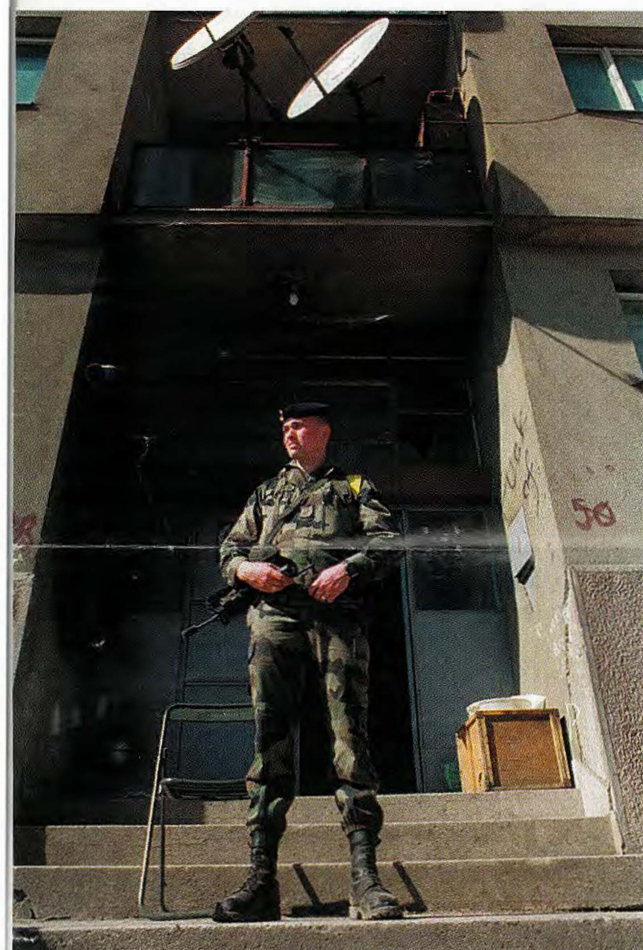
"This isn't normal, we know. But is it normal not to be in your own house?" asks Hyla Gashi's husband, Aziz. "Can you be free when you are not in your own house?" For Albanians on the Serb side of Mitrovica, the situation worsened after the war because many Serbs who were expelled from other parts of Kosovo took refuge there. In early February, the Gashis fled the flat they have lived in for 28 years after nine ethnic Albanians were killed in the area. They decided to return in early March, once UN troops had begun securing the complex.

When the war in Kosovo ended last June, the United Nations, NATO, and hundreds of charity organizations arrived to help rebuild the country. Ethnic Albanians are grateful for all the aid but long for the day when they can live in peace without a multitude of foreigners dictating their lives. For now the decision to move back is one of the only choices they feel they can control. Explaining the logic that drove him to return, Hysan Huti, a neighbor of the Gashis, says, "The sooner we got back home, the sooner things would start to be normal."

About 90 French soldiers guard the apartments. Troops stationed on the roofs watch visitors as they pass between two tanks to enter the buildings.

Pockets and bags are checked for weapons. Residents must have laminated ID cards, which they leave with the two soldiers guarding the door so the troops know who is home at all times. Five times daily, armored personnel carriers take children to school *continued on page 62*

Ethnic Albanian refugees are returning to their homes in Kosovo. An international group of NATO soldiers with tanks (left) guard an apartment complex in Mitrovica (far left), where residents are effectively imprisoned for their own protection. Residents are greeted by 24-hour armed "doormen" (top left).



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and adults to work or out shopping. Ethnic Albanians don't leave their apartments under any other circumstances. They know the Serbs resent the protection they receive, and they fear reprisals. "I sit home and watch TV," says Aziz Gashi. "I don't know the last time I went out."

The decision to facilitate the return of the ethnic Albanians was controversial. The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees opposed the idea, claiming the situation was too tense and the extraordinary security measures couldn't be maintained over time. The United Nations Mission in Kosovo (UNMIK), which runs the province, says no one was forced to go home, but the animosity between the two ethnic groups practically assured that any returns would be complicated. "It's uncomfortable to see the conditions," says UNMIK spokesperson Kirsten Haupt. "But if you want to achieve returns, you have to start somewhere."

Mitrovica is an unlikely location to inspire such debate. It is a grimy industrial town about half an hour north of Pristina, Kosovo's provincial capital. The apartments in the eight-story gray slabs are ordinary, remarkable only to their owners for their monetary and sentimental value. "It is not as if these people have a lot of options. These apartments are their hope for the future," says Kemal Kurspahic, a fellow at the US Institute of Peace, who witnessed the war in Sarajevo. "People in less-developed places don't have the luxury of worrying about quality of life."

Indeed, Aziz Gashi is no stranger to confinement. During NATO's bombing of Yugoslavia last year, he and his family rarely ventured out because they feared attacks by Serbs who blame them for NATO's action. They survived daily intimidation by the Yugoslav military. On one occasion, Aziz was badly beaten by Yugoslav soldiers in his own kitchen. He never thought that NATO would again put a de facto clamp on his freedom, but at least now he doesn't fear for his safety in his own home. "This is better than what we had," he says with a shrug.

Hysan Huti insists that being a prisoner in his own home is preferable to what his family experienced when they fled their apartment in February.

They stayed with relatives on the Albanian side of the city but had to split up because no one had room for him and his wife, son, daughter-in-law, and grandson. "The family should be together," Huti says. "My son grew up in this house, learned to read in this house. I want the same for my grandson." Huti says he especially missed seeing his grandson because the two-year-old had been a great source of joy in the midst of the tumult.

Huti's wife, Atjen, adds that everything good in her life is somehow connected to the apartment. It is the only place she has ever lived with her husband, it is where she brought her three children after they were born, and it is where she left from on her first day as a kindergarten teacher, a job she loves. "This is where I feel like myself," she says. "When I came back here, I felt like an angel."

Unlike the Hutis and the Gashis, the Ibrani family didn't stay in Mitrovica during the bombing of Yugoslavia in early 1999. They were in Montenegro and only returned home last July. Seven months later, when the nine ethnic Albanians were killed, they fled again. Both times Firrije Ibrani wondered if Serbs would move into the flat she and her husband have lived in for 22 years. She worried that someone would steal the crystal bowl he gave her to commemorate the birth of her only son. Ibrani was relieved to find everything intact when she returned in March: Her possessions bolster her memories of better days. "I've had so many happy times here," says the 43-year-old.

Ibrani admits that her family couldn't afford to buy another flat in a calmer part of Kosovo, and that certainly fueled the decision to return. But, she adds, the flat and her family are her only constants in Kosovo's troubled history. "We've been running for a long time," she says. "I put my will in God's hands." That will was tested when three rockets were fired on the buildings soon after her family moved back in. No one was hurt. "I was scared," she admits. "But we are staying."

Ironically, Serbian residents are moving out of the buildings now that they are guarded by French troops. Serbs charge that the Albanians who have moved into the apartments are not the same families who resided there previously. Haupt of UNMIK insists that all Albanians who moved back into buildings had to prove residency.

"They are people in the Kosovo Liberation Army," says Lacko, a 45-year-old Serbian truck driver who didn't want to give his last name. "I never saw those people before, and I was afraid." Lacko, who had lived in his flat for 15 years, never thought he'd leave. "There is no life left for me there," he says now. "No flat is worth your life."

—Theresa Agovino