

QIREZI Dodging bullets while searching for health care in Kosovo

The patients risk crossfire as they wait outside a two-room storefront health clinic in this town in central Kosovo. They are the lucky ones—at least they have somewhere to go. The already-weak health-care system is another victim of the 7-month conflict between Serbian forces and the Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA), the guerrilla group fighting for the independence of the province, which is more than 90% ethnic Albanian.

At least 300 medical outposts have been destroyed in the fighting and published reports say that at least two Albanian doctors have been killed by government forces while 20 or more have been either arrested or fled during the fighting.

During the conflict, Serbian roadblocks created a sinister cocoon that kept some doctors inside with few or no medical supplies while often obstructing access to international medical agencies. No-one knows how many deaths resulted from this policy. Access is no longer a problem. However, international relief organisations report that supply trucks continue to be held up at the border while visas are denied to critical personnel.

"The health system isn't really functional", says Skander Kullovcici, a doctor with Pharmacists Sans Frontières. Before the conflict started, most Albanians avoided local hospitals because they were afraid of the Serbian personnel who ran them. That fear has been exacerbated since the fighting began. Now Albanians go without health care or get it where they can.

About 700 people have visited the clinic in Qirezi since it was opened in late September by a third-year medical student who was both a soldier and a doctor for the KLA. Naim Bardiqi enters wearing military fatigues, a machine-gun slung over his shoulder, and a revolver tucked in his belt. An armed guard stands at the door while other soldiers linger outside. Bardiqi says the protection is necessary because he fears reprisals from Serb police and rival factions of the KLA.

And yes, he finds it ironic that people who have managed to survive the war, risk gunshots while waiting for medical care. "Our people have suffered so much", says Bardiqi, who started the clinic with money he saved while working in Germany. The clinic receives pharmaceuticals and supplies from various international aid organisations. Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) used the storefront to set up

their mobile clinic. MSF field coordinator, Keith Ursel, acknowledges the decision could have negative consequences. Serbian authorities have long maintained that the humanitarian organisations are only helping terrorists since most of the recipients of the aid are Albanian. Certainly, the scene in the Qirezi clinic could feed such paranoia.

"It is a risk we have to take. This is where the people are", says Ursel. During the height of the conflict, aid organisations found it difficult to



Capitalising on a break in the gunfire

reach people because they were often turned away at checkpoints armed by Serbian police. Even when reaching hard-hit areas of the conflict was possible, doctors had limited options. "We could clean wounds, give antibiotics", says Kullovcici. "There wasn't much we could do."

No-one knows exactly how many people have died in the conflict, and of the dead how many could have been saved had proper medical care been immediately available. At one point during the conflict, 50 000 people were living in forests and fields to escape the marauding Serbian forces who razed villages to find the KLA. People living in the make-shift refugee camps had diarrhoea, skin rashes, and chest infections, says Ursel. He adds that it is believed that infant mortality increased because of the circumstances in which women had to give birth.

US embassy officials say that only 10 000 people continue to live in the open, and that the rest have either gone to live with friends or relatives or returned to try to rebuild their damaged homes. Humanitarian work-

ers say it would be easier for them to help people if they went home so they could properly assess the needs of the population. But Kullovcici says many Albanian doctors are afraid to return home because they worry about retaliation from Serb police for having treated members of the KLA.

MSF staff say that Serb forces intentionally killed a physician in late September. Lec Ukaj had been the sole health-care provider for about 30 villages. Serbian officials could not be reached for comment. "I can't tell you how I felt when I heard the doctor was killed", says Drita Salihu, a 25-year-old whose severely retarded son was often treated by Ukaj. "I don't have words to explain my feelings about this place", she says referring to the Qirezi clinic where her son was being treated for diarrhoea.

It is not just Albanian doctors who are at risk. A doctor for the International Red Cross was killed in late September when his car hit a landmine. Landmine sites are being discovered because access to the region where the worst of the fighting raged has become easier since the very fragile ceasefire began. The United Nations High Commission on Refugees says there are five known mined sites in Kosovo.

Of course, the ceasefire is no panacea. MSF says four of its trucks

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have been at the border for 2 months and they are consequently low on everything from aspirin to antibiotics.

Serb authorities are also slow in granting visas that would allow more staff to enter the country. "These things really slow us down", says Ursel. Since the fighting peaked over the summer, more aid organisations have entered Kosovo. This influx should benefit the population.

During the height of the conflict, MSF and the Red Cross were the only organisations providing medical care in the war zone. Now, there are four organisations, including MSF, running mobile clinics. However, coordination between the groups is still sketchy. Another mobile clinic was in Qirezi the day before MSF set up theirs. "Everybody wants to be in the sexy areas", says Ursel. "We had to give up some of ours just so [other aid agencies] would go to work."

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