Refugees and Internally Displaced: Some Lessons from the Kosovo Crisis

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Abstract

This paper argues that NATO failed to protect the ethnic Albanians of Kosovo and offers four lessons: military and humanitarian action should be better coordinated; internally displaced persons should be protected as well as refugees; humanitarian corridors and safe havens should not be dismissed out of hand; and civilian lives must be valued as much as those in uniforms.

Résumé

Le présent article présente une argumentation selon laquelle l'OTAN a échoué dans sa tentative de protéger la minorité ethnique albanaise du Kosovo. On y dégage quatre leçons: les actions militaires et humanitaires devraient être mieux coordonnées; les personnes déplacées à l'intérieur des territoires devraient être protégées autant que les réfugiés; les corridors humanitaires et les espaces hors-conflits ne devraient pas être délimités et relocalisés au gré de la conjoncture; les vies civiles devraient être traitées comme ayant autant de valeur que les vies sous uniforme.

NATO has won the war against the government of Serbia, but it failed utterly to achieve the aim for which the war was launched: to protect the ethnic Albanians of Kosovo. Almost the entire Albanian population of the province was uprooted. Nearly a million fled or were forced across borders into neighbouring countries by Serb forces; another five hundred thousand or more became internally displaced, without adequate food, shelter or medicine. The Serbs killed thousands of them, separated tens of thousands of men from their families and held them hostage, committed uncounted atrocities, and destroyed villages, homes and farmlands. As United Nations Under-Secretary-General Sergio Vieira de Mello reported to the Security Council, "the period from March 24 to April 10 saw a rampage of killing, burning, looting, forced expulsions, violence, vendetta and terror."[1] And if this were not enough, dozens, possibly hundreds, of fleeing Kosovar Albanians were killed or wounded in NATO bombing attacks.

Why this failure and—as Kosovo is likely to be only the twentieth century's last great humanitarian crisis—how can the same be prevented from happening again? Here are a few suggestions that planners in governments, United Nations agencies and non-governmental organizations might take into account before they go on to deal with more crises in future.

1.) A prime, overriding lesson of the Kosovo crisis is that military and humanitarian action must be arranged in tandem and right from the start in situations where the two are plainly intertwined. In this crisis, it was clear from the outset that the "ethnic cleansing" campaign launched by the Serbs was a counterinsurgency strategy to deprive the Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA) of its civilian base. It was also clear that the Yugoslav government was seeking to alter the demographic composition of Kosovo. Indeed, plans to expel substantial numbers of ethnic Albanians from Kosovo were developed well before the war. There were already 170,000 refugees and a quarter of a million internally displaced persons whose dilemma stemmed from the Kosovo crisis prior to March 24.

Yet NATO launched its bombing campaign with virtually no serious thought about how to contain the humanitarian disaster that would follow. U.S. envoy Richard Holbrooke, when asked if he thought NATO air attacks would push the Serbs into ever more vicious "ethnic cleansing," replied: "That is our greatest fear by far."[2] But close consultation with the UN's humanitarian agencies did not take place. In fact, UNHCR, was caught largely unprepared by the massive outpouring of refugees into Albania and Macedonia. Only once the dimensions of the crisis were understood did NATO and the international community move quickly to provide basic food and shelter to the refugees. Better advance planning and prepositioning of supplies and personnel would have made the operation more effective, saved lives and prevented much suffering.

2.) Refugee populations must not be the only concern. Civilian and military planners must give at least equal weight to protecting those trapped inside—the internally displaced. Means must be devised to minimize deaths, injuries and severe suffering among those most cruelly exposed. In this task, NATO abdicated its responsibilities. Its high-flying planes mistakenly hit convoys of displaced persons as well as hospitals and trains. Nor would it deploy low-flying helicopters and planes early on to strike Serb forces and tanks directly involved in the "ethnic cleansing." And it would not conduct airdrops of food and medicines to beleaguered internally displaced populations. Indeed, when mass hunger and the deaths, for lack of medical treatment of the injured and wounded, began to be reported, a single stalwart non-governmental organization, the International Rescue Commit-

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tee, came forward to try to mount an air-drop capability.

3.) The idea of establishing "humanitarian assistance corridors" and "safe havens" must never be dismissed out of hand, as it was in the Kosovo crisis. It was only toward the end of May that NATO reportedly began to provide some limited air support to the KLA to create a supply corridor, but when this failed, it did not try to create one itself. The International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) did manage to gain entry at the end of May, but by then the war was drawing to a close.

As for safe havens, there has been much debate about them among, and within, humanitarian assistance organizations.[3] Opponents regularly point to the international community's failure to protect the safe areas established during the Bosnian crisis—in Srebrenica and Zepa in 1995, or in Rwanda at the Kibeho camp that same year. But these so-called safe havens were protected by only lightly armed UN forces whose highly ambiguous mandate was basically interpreted to mean that they should fight only to protect themselves. The lesson from such experiences should not be that safe havens are in and of themselves harmful to the populations they purport to protect, but that they must be guarded by forces both capable of and authorized to defend against attack. In the 1991 crisis in Iraq, the safe haven created in the north by allied forces did protect and allow the return of a large displaced Kurdish population.[4]

Had NATO been prepared to take the risk in Kosovo, it could have created one or more large protected areas where internally displaced people could have fled en route to countries outside, or where they could have remained in safety until the war's end. This would have required a limited intervention of NATO ground forces and the concomitant risk of casualties. But when the final tallying is done, the cost to the civilian population trapped inside Kosovo of NATO's—principally the U.S.'s—insistence on a war with no casualties to its own forces, is likely to be found far too great.

4.) This brings us to a final question that political leaders and planners in military and humanitarian organizations should ponder as they look back on the lessons of Kosovo, and forward to action in similar crises; namely, to what extent should it be deemed morally (or even politically) permissible to avoid death or injury to soldiers at the cost of many, many more lives and terrible suffering by civilians? No one wishes for military casualties. Yet is it not shameful to exult in their absence, knowing full well that the price for sparing injury to those in uniform was paid by thousands upon thousands of innocent, unarmed civilians, many of them internally displaced?

In the Kosovo crisis, the only humanitarian system that worked properly—albeit with undue delay—was the one set up after the second world war to protect refugees. When one takes into account that in Europe only some sixty years ago, countries routinely turned back those fleeing from Nazi Germany and from countries occupied by the Nazis, the creation of the refugee regime is to be applauded. In fact, refugee protection, in fact, must be considered one of the great accomplishments of the twentieth century. The creation of an international system to protect people under assault within their own countries will be a more challenging task for the twenty-first. ■

Notes

1. Briefing to the Security Council, 2 June 1999, by Sergio Vieira de Mello, Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, New York.
2. Blaine Harden, "A Long Struggle that Led Serb Leader to Back Down," *New York Times*, June 6, 1999, 12.
3. See, for example, *Inter-Agency Expert Consultation on Protected Areas*, Harvard University, April 7, 1999; Bill Frelick, "Safe zones not an answer for Kosovars," *Christian Science Monitor*, May 19, 1999; Princeton Lyman, "Make A Haven at Home for the Refugees," *Washington Post*, April 12, 1999; Roberta Cohen, "Uprooted Inside Kosovo Need Aid," *Newsday*, April 9, 1999; and Roberta Cohen and Francis M. Deng, *Masses in Flight: The Global Crisis of Internal Displacement* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 1998), 162–63, 251–54, 280–84.
4. Whereas some point to the invasion of Iraqi troops in 1996 as a sign that the safe area was not protected, these critics generally fail to note that it was a leading Kurdish faction itself that invited the Iraqi army in to join their fight against a rival Kurdish faction. □