

## Letters To The Editor

Dear Sir:

With reference to the interesting article "Kosovar Refugee Assessments in Montenegro and Albania" by Brown and colleagues<sup>1</sup>, we like to report on a similar survey conducted among Kosovar refugees in two Macedonian refugee camps on 1-3 May 1999. We are grateful to Vincent Brown who helped us designing our study and our questionnaire. We could fortunately draw upon his experience in the Montenegro survey. The main objectives for our survey were:

- To describe the causes and chronology of the exodus;
- To establish demographic data on the refugee population;
- To describe the demographic impact of the expulsions and exodus;

A family survey using a questionnaire was conducted among 37,000 Kosovar refugees in Cegrana and Brazda camps in Macedonia. Families were randomly selected with systematic sampling (Cegrana camp) and two-stage cluster sampling (Brazda camp). We were able to interview representatives of 325 families in Cegrana (179) and Brazda (146) camp.

The major finding by Brown et al. that 80% of the Kosovar families had left their homes because of violence and/or direct physical threats was confirmed in our survey (79%). We found that 19% had left their homes before March 24 1999. This reflects the violence and threats on these families before the NATO intervention started. Furthermore there are two noteworthy points regarding the age and sex distribution in our study population. Firstly, we found an overall male:female ratio of 1:1.13 in the interviewed families at the time of the interview, similar to the findings by Brown and colleagues. Interpreting these results is not straightforward. During the interview many families mentioned that several men in their family had been working in industrialised European countries long before the recent outbreak of violence started. Since this issue was not clearly defined in the questionnaire we cannot quantify this economically instigated migration reliably. Secondly, we found a male:female ratio for the under fives of 1: 0.87 which is quite different from data from most other European countries (e.g. for the Netherlands 1: 0.95) but proved consistent with demographic data found in censuses in Albania<sup>2</sup>. The data on involuntary separation (reported by 54 (16%) families) were analysed at the level of the sampling unit, the family. We therefore calculated for each family the difference in percentage of men vs. women that were involuntarily separated. We used a non-parametric method (Wilcoxon's signed rank test) to analyse whether there were more families that had been separated involuntarily from a larger proportion of men than women. This was the case and the difference was statistically significant ( $p=0.012$ ). Although differently analysed, we come to the same conclusion as Brown and colleagues on this matter.

In our survey 5 violent deaths were reported in a total of 4 families. In addition two non-violent deaths were reported between September 1998 and May 1999. The recall period started at the start of the families' exodus and therefore differed per family. We found that in our sample less violent deaths were reported in a longer recall period compared to Brown's report.

We join Brown et al in their conclusion that these surveys, including ours in Macedonian refugee camps, strongly confirm the systematic violations of human rights of the Kosovar Albanians, which are consistent with other reports obtained by individual interviews. Furthermore our study demonstrated also that there were more adult women than men in the families interviewed. This can partially be explained by the fact that



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families lost more men than women. However, we want to stress the need for careful interpretation of the presented data on the demographic impact of the exodus as we do not have demographic data on these families in the period before the violence started to compare it with our current findings. Expert demographic advice, preferably from Kosovar sources, would be necessary to understand the age and sex distribution. In addition we cannot confirm nor deny the conclusion by Brown et al. that many heads of family were women and/or elderly since we did not include such a question in our questionnaire and sociological data are needed to interpret our findings.

In conclusion, there seems to have been no difference in the reasons why families had left their homes in Kosovo, whether they came to Albania, Montenegro or Macedonia. We have no reason to believe that this result, found in three separate surveys in three host countries, would not apply to all Kosovar refugees who fled their country in 1999.

Sincerely,

Guus ten Asbroek, epidemiologist, MSF and Academic Medical Centre Amsterdam

Welmoet Tuynman, health advisor, MSF

Katrien Coppens, humanitarian affairs advisor, MSF

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Brown V, Perea W, Godain G, Dachy E, Valenciano M. Kosovar Refugee Assessments in Montenegro and Albania. *Refuge* 2000: vol 18, (5), 43 – 45.

<sup>2</sup> World Population Prospects, 1998 revision Vol II: Sex and Age. United Nations Economic and Social Affairs Dept. Page 144.

## Corrections

### Volume 19.1 Guest Editor: Kathryn Graham

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