

**Inter-Agency Standing Committee Working Group Meeting
Geneva, 29 January 1999**

**Speaking Notes of Neill Wright, Head of Former Yugoslavia Liaison Unit
United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
on the situation in the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia/Kosovo**

I am grateful for this opportunity to address the IASC WG on the situation in FRY/Kosovo. All will be aware of the fast-moving pace of events at present, particularly in the political sphere in seeking early negotiations. As the lead agency for humanitarian operations in Kosovo, as elsewhere in FY, UNHCR is working closely each day on the ground with UNICEF, WFP, WHO and our many NGO partners. UNHCR is also working closely with the Office of the UNHCHR, whose field presence has just had a most welcome strengthening. We are of course cooperating equally closely with the ICRC, whose unique role is of critical importance to us all in such situations, and with the OSCE KVM.

The recent cycle of violence, discrimination and displacement continues. The numbers of those forced or who choose to flee their homes has continued to escalate in the past 4 weeks. Since 24 December, the parties seem determined to continue fighting, as evidenced by the violence in Podujevo, Decane, Stimlje and Suva Reka - including the massacre in Racak, in Mitrovica, and during the past 48 hours in the Podujevo region once again - where our latest field reports indicate that 1,600 have fled six small villages southwest of Podujevo - most now sheltering in other houses with as many as 80 to a room. UNHCR estimates that some 375,000 inhabitants of Kosovo are away from the homes they were in a year ago. Of these, some 200,000 are displaced within Kosovo, often living in very cramped conditions and without adequate protection from the cold. Of the recently displaced 32,000, we estimate that some 10,500 have already been able to return to their homes, which is indicative of the ebb and flow of the displacement in Kosovo.

Our colleagues are this morning with KVM continuing to try to locate those who fled the violence in the Podujevo area; and it is snowing there. It is essential to remember that while the great majority of these persons are KAs, the figure includes several tens of thousands of Serbs, and Roma - some of the most tragic victims - and others.

Nicholas Morris, our Special Envoy, reported to the CoE Parliamentary Assembly yesterday in Strasbourg. I have taken the liberty of plagiarizing his statement. He said that: *“walking through the village of Racak last Saturday, finding no one, just open doors, the evidence of violent death inside some homes, and bewildered domestic livestock, was a sadly familiar experience, and something that we had hoped we would not see again. Most of the few persons we found in Petrovo, the next village, had, like the inhabitants of Racak, already had to flee once, last August.”*

We must also remember that, in addition, some 25,000 are displaced in Montenegro and at least 20,000 Kosovo Serbs are displaced in Serbia. 35,000 are refugees in countries bordering the FRY. [Albania 22,000; FYROM 3,000, BiH 10,000] In 1998, some 75,000 persons from Kosovo sought asylum in western Europe.

The deployment of the KVM has made a major positive contribution to the humanitarian action, and giving people the confidence to return - as evidenced by returns to Malisevo [3,000 returnees] and Junik [1,500 returnees].

The High Commissioner welcomes the accelerated political activity this week. A just and sustainable solution in Kosovo would not only end the suffering, but would have a direct positive impact on the lives of the over 500,000 refugees from BiH and Croatia in FRY itself from the earlier conflicts. While some would return home if they could, many are expected to choose to start a new life in FRY if an internationally supported solution in Kosovo allows economic recovery to begin. The FRY authorities sometimes accuse the IC of abandoning these refugees. This is certainly not the case. Many of them have acute needs and it is important that these are met, and that the largest single group of refugees in Europe is not forgotten in the shadow of Kosovo.

Despite many efforts, we have not been able to make progress on an amnesty although Point 10 of the 13 Oct Serbian declaration provided that no one would be prosecuted for crimes related to the conflict, except crimes against humanity and international humanitarian law. The FRY Government remains adamant that it will not discuss amnesty until a political solution is found.

While less important, it should be noted that the authorities have pledged their full cooperation with humanitarian actors - yet their media, and even ministers, continue to attack this action and level false accusation against it, even threatening our national staff as "traitors".

To conclude, as the 24 December report of the SG to the SC said, "*Should the worst happen, it would be very difficult for the humanitarian action to meet the resulting needs, still less encourage those affected, to return and rebuild their homes and lives once more*". The IC's actions since October have bought some time, and avoided what would by now have been a humanitarian catastrophe. Today, our colleagues are also ensuring they are prepared for the consequences if the FRY Government and KA leaders do not meet for negotiations in the next 10 or 11 days - as the Contact Group is expected to demand when it meets today in London. NATO made clear yesterday that it stands ready to use air strikes, and does not rule out the possibility of ground troops in FRY/Kosovo, if during the preparations for or conduct of negotiations, the parties continue to fail to comply with the responsibilities under SCR 1199 and the October 98 agreements. This return to an early-October 1998 scenario, and the daily security risks our colleagues face, are discussed each morning in an inter-agency meeting in Pristina which includes the KVM.

UNHCR greatly appreciates the excellent collaboration on the ground with our sister agencies, NGO partners, the ICRC and the KVM in providing some protection and relief for those suffering in FRY/Kosovo during these difficult times.

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