

Returning home: In Kosovo

by [Duncan Hanson](#) in the [August 11, 1999](#) issue

For many there wasn't even time to say good-bye. CNN had reported that Serbs were leaving Kosovo in droves and that the refugees' old towns and villages suddenly stood open. It took only a few minutes for most Kosovar refugees to reach the same conclusion: they needed to get back to their homes as soon as possible to protect them from looting or vandalism, whether at the hands of the departing Serbs or the returning Kosovars.

So they piled into cars, buses, trucks and horse-pulled wagons and left. When volunteers arrived at the camps the next day with bread, coffee and stew, they found mostly empty tents. A couple of hours later, when other volunteers arrived to continue the previous day's English lessons or to play with kids who had been traumatized by violence, many of the Kosovars were already high in the mountains and jamming the mountain passes at Librazhd and Kolsh.

When the Kosovars arrived home, a lucky few simply unlocked their doors to find everything exactly as they had left it. But many others found that their apartments had been stripped of valuables and that their family photos or son's soccer gear or daughter's dolls had been dumped behind a neighbor's shed.

Others discovered that their wells had been contaminated by Serbs who had dumped in motor oil, or the carcasses of dead animals or even murdered human beings. Many others, up to 60 percent of the population in some areas in western Kosovo, found their houses burnt to the ground or blown up by a mortar shell or a hand grenade.

The most unlucky came back to houses that had been booby-trapped with explosives. Some boys in Prizrin, for instance, were blown up by a bomb that went off when they put a tape in the family's tape player. In Djakovica some French doctors were invited for coffee by a family that had just returned home. As the doctors were leaving, a member of the family moved a table in order to clean up. An explosive device that had been taped to the bottom of the table went off, instantly killing the father of the family and three children. The French doctors, who were

outside the house, escaped injury.

The relief agencies that had been responding to the refugee crisis, including Action by Churches Together (ACT), a World Council of Churches-related agency that coordinates the Kosovo relief work of the Church of Sweden, Norwegian Church Aid, Christian Aid of Britain and the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), had been deep into refugee work in Albania, Macedonia, Montenegro and other countries in southeastern Europe and were not prepared for the refugees' sudden return to Kosovo. Yet prepared or not, all the agencies recognized immediately that the needs in Kosovo would be enormous. Not only would many people find that their houses had been destroyed or mined or were otherwise unlivable, but the departing Serb forces had also planted mines in many fields to make it more difficult for the returning Kosovars to reap the harvest.

There was also, of course, some damage from bombing, although in the several days my colleagues and I crisscrossed Kosovo we saw only a couple of factories and one oil storage depot that appeared to have been struck by aerial bombs. In contrast, we saw thousands of destroyed houses. (We did not travel much off the main highways, except in Pristina, Prizrin and Decani, so our estimate of damage from NATO bombing is only tentative.)

Just weeks after the Kosovars' return, many relief agencies were at work in Kosovo. As they did in Albania, the Church of Sweden and the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) are planning trauma care and psychosocial ministries in various points in Kosovo as coordinated by ACT. Mission worker Kathy Angi is making an assessment of needs for ACT that will be critical in shaping the psychosocial work in Kosovo. A group of volunteers from Ohio will be joining evangelical Christians from various European countries in children's play therapy in Prizrin in late August. Albanian evangelicals are exploring how they might supplement or complement the work of Kosovo's seven evangelical congregations.

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In the little town of Decani in western Kosovo my colleagues and I were invited for coffee in a little café that had reopened a week earlier. The manager told me we were the first Americans to be served in the resurrected café, and he gave us a bottle of 12-year-old sherry that he had saved for the day that the Kosovars would again have a reason to celebrate in Kosovo. Until nine years ago, the café had

served Kosovars and Serbs alike. In 1990 the ruling came down that only Serbs could enter the café. Now it is again, officially at least, open to members of both national groups.

Thus far no Serb has entered. And there are very few, if any, Serbs left in Decani- and few anywhere else in Kosovo. Every day since the Serb army withdrew from Kosovo there has been at least one attack by Kosovars on Serb civilians. As a result, except for a few Serbs in Mitrovica in northern Kosovo, the Serbs who remain in the country are reported by refugee workers to be waiting until they can secure safe passage to Serbia. They know, of course, that the Serbs of Serbia can ill afford to accept them and that therefore for many Serbian Serbs they will be less than welcome. But they have no other realistic choice.

For several years human rights organizations and churches have tried to call attention to the atrocities committed against the Kosovars. From now on, as the number of revenge killings of Serbs by Kosovars mounts, those concerned about human rights will need to speak out also for the Serbs who remain in Kosovo. They are surely as much victims of Serb dictator Slobodan Milosevic and his policies as are the Kosovars.

In the weeks since the end of the war, several Orthodox churches in Kosovo cities have been burned by angry Kosovars in retaliation for the mistreatment they suffered at the hands of Serbs. I visited one monastery that has remained unscathed, partly thanks to a protective squad of Italian soldiers, complete with a tank and an armored personnel carrier. Another reason it has been preserved, however, is that the monks at this monastery, like a number of other brave monks and priests and hierarchs as well as laypeople of the Serbian Orthodox Church, have long been outspoken opponents of Milosevic's policy toward the Kosovars. The monks hope that their Kosovar neighbors will remember how they stood up against the Milosevic regime.

Perhaps even more important for the future of this monastery was the decision of the monks to offer housing to Kosovars who had been driven from their homes by Serb military and police forces. It is easy to imagine that the monks did a lot of praying when they opened their massive wooden doors to the Muslim Kosovars. When the war ended and the Kosovars who had been in the monastery left to return to their homes, the monks decided to give shelter to Serbs and Roma who felt themselves to be endangered. Now these Serb and Roma refugees have also mostly

moved on, and the monastery is considering taking in yet a new group.

Is this monastery representative of the Serbian Orthodox Church as a whole, either in Kosovo or in Serbia itself? I can't offer any statistics on how many, either within the church or outside the church, offered active resistance to the Milosevic government. In any case, faithfulness is a theological and not a statistical question. The church may be tested by persecutions and tribulations and many may fall away, but theologically we know that where the true church is there also will always be a faithful remnant. We have seen that remnant in Kosovo.

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As I write from a hotel room in Pristina, hundreds of people are gathered on the square under my window, chatting and listening to the rock music blaring from an aging box speaker fixed to a building on the other side of the square. It is a cool night, very pleasant after a hot day. Even though there is no water in downtown Pristina and even though there is a sign in the hotel lobby apologizing in advance in case the electricity goes off, the happy mood of the milling crowd suggests that everything is almost normal again in Europe's newest capital city.

I cannot help thinking of how differently the future must look now for the people of Belgrade than it does for the inhabitants of Pristina. In Pristina the future is open in a way it has not been since the Middle Ages. Nominally, of course, Pristina, like all of Kosovo, still belongs to Serbia, but the Kosovars know that Kosovo will never be returned to Serbia against their will, and they know that they will never agree to it. In Belgrade, on the other hand, eight years of economic sanctions and ten weeks of bombing have not only destroyed that city's economic infrastructure but also, according to reports from Milosevic critics in Belgrade, the spiritual life of the people. They know that as long as Milosevic is the leader of their country they cannot expect their life to return to normal. They also know that Milosevic will never give up power voluntarily.

The inhabitants of Pristina see themselves as the more or less innocent victims of Serb repression and terror. Moreover, they believe-with a good deal of justification-that most of the rest of the world sees them the same way. The Serbs know that they too have suffered, but they see very little sympathy for them coming from anyone. Most Serbs still do not believe that their army and police committed genocide in Kosovo, in spite of a growing mountain of evidence indicating that they did, but they are aware that the rest of the world thinks they are guilty of serious

crimes against humanity. So while the Kosovars can devote themselves to building a better future without too many pangs of conscience, the same cannot be said of the Serbs.