

BOSNIA the flight from 'ethnic cleansing'

BYLINE: Stories and photos by Lee Malis

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HIGHLIGHT: On his most recent trip to the former Yugoslavia, photographer Lee Malis spent nine days with refugees who had been forced from their towns in eastern Bosnia. Many have lost touch with family members; all have lost their homes and belongings. Today the Monitor presents a few pages of their stories.

THE war in Bosnia continues. Diplomats still talk about what needs to be done, and how to make it stand once it is agreed upon.

But the television news broadcasts say the bombings continue in Sarajevo. Another Bosnian village with a strange name falls to Serbian militias, and another massacre occurs in an unfamiliar place. Muslims try to retake eastern towns, and Serbs block UN attempts to break through with aid.

I have worked in the former Yugoslavia three times over the past two years as a freelance photographer for US magazines. During my first trip to Sarajevo, my guide was killed, a young Spanish photographer I had become friends with died, and my friend who is an Associated Press photographer was wounded. Hundreds of other men, women, and children also died in those short two or three weeks in Sarajevo.

On my last trip, in late November, I tried to make a portrait of the refugees in Travnik, a small city in the mountains of Bosnia 60 miles northwest of Sarajevo. I spent nine days living in a refugee camp there.

These were average Muslim Bosnians. They were not diplomats or generals or politicians. They were moms and dads, electricians and farmers, and children. Their names cannot be used because they have left families behind in villages under Serbian control.

There are hundreds of thousands of refugees in Bosnia, primarily because of "ethnic cleansing" by the Serbs. In Travnik and surrounding communities 20,000 to 30,000 refugees are scattered in homes, schools, and sports halls.

When the Serbs take an area, they "cleanse" cities and towns of non-Serbs, who make up about two thirds of the Bosnian population. Just over half are Muslims, and the rest are Croats. Those "cleansed" are either killed, sent to refugee camps or prison camps, or most often just told to leave or they will be killed. The Muslim population is taking the worst of the atrocities.

Since the war began last year, Serbian militias have taken control of close to 70 percent of the country. The refugees lose their homes and belongings. When the Muslims reach a refugee camp, they can go no farther. Many European countries have closed their borders, because they say they have no more room for Bosnian refugees.