

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF STATE

Excerpt From "Erasing History: Ethnic Cleansing in Kosovo"

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What began in late February 1998 as a Serb government campaign against the separatist Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA) has evolved into a comprehensive, premeditated, and systematic program to ethnically cleanse the Serbian province of Kosovo of its roughly 1.7 million ethnic Albanian residents (also referred to as Kosovar Albanians). Because Serbian authorities have denied access to international monitors, documentation efforts have been too fragmented to estimate definitively the number of missing and dead. . . .

The term "ethnic cleansing" first came into use during the mass expulsions of ethnic Muslims from towns in eastern Bosnia-Herzegovina in 1992; since then, media outlets, human rights groups and governments have used it on enough occasions to require careful definition. As used in this report, ethnic cleansing is defined as the systematic and forced removal of the members of an ethnic group from a community or communities in order to change the ethnic composition of a given region.

In Bosnia, many ethnically cleansed towns and regions were eventually reoccupied by members of another ethnic group (who themselves often had been cleansed).

From the beginning, the [Serbian] regime in Belgrade has deliberately misled the international community and its own people about its ethnic cleansing campaign. Counterinsurgency operations against the KLA began in late February and early March 1998, when Serbian Ministry of Internal Affairs Police (MUP) attacked the villages of Likosane and Cirez. These attacks resulted in the death of 25 Kosovar Albanians, of which as many as 14 may have been summarily executed. . . .

In late March 1999, Serbian forces dramatically increased the scope and pace of their efforts, moving away from selective targeting of towns and regions suspected of KLA sympathies toward a sustained and systematic effort to ethnically cleanse the entire province of Kosovo. To date, Serb forces conducting ethnic cleansing operations have not yet tried to repopulate the over 500 towns and villages from which residents have been evicted. Some villages are now used as cover for Serb military emplacements. Many, however, remain depopulated. NATO is committed to ensuring the return of all Kosovars to their homes.

Since March 19, 1999, the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) estimates that over 700,000 Kosovars have fled to the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia (211,000), Albania (404,000), Bosnia-Herzegovina (17,000) the Republic of Montenegro (62,000), and elsewhere (as of May 5, 1999).

[See Figure 13.10.]

The Governments of Macedonia, Albania, Bosnia, and Montenegro have provided land for camps, logistical support, and protection. NATO forces in Macedonia and Albania have helped establish transit camps. Other governments have begun to accept varying numbers of refugees to ease the pressure on the so-called "front-line" states. Even with such support, however, the frontline states will continue to bear the brunt of these mass expulsions, which has badly burdened the economies and upset the political balances of these states.

Although the media has focused almost exclusively on the story of the hundreds of thousands of exhausted refugees arriving at camps in Macedonia and Albania, another story has escaped their attention, in large part because Serbian authorities have not permitted entry into Kosovo. Those left behind in Kosovo—known as internally displaced persons, or IDPs—suffer under much worse conditions than even those faced by refugees. While independent sources have not been able to confirm reports of starvation among IDPs in Kosovo, many in all likelihood are experiencing food shortages, malnutrition, health problems, and other types of deprivation as a result of having to hide from Serbian forces for weeks in neighboring mountains and forests. Needless to say, they also likely face attack by Serbian forces. According to some reports, VJ [Yugoslav Army] units have thrown grenades from helicopters at fleeing IDPs. Shelling of civilians reportedly has been used to herd groups of refugees for later deportation.