

Report on a Visit to Refugee Camps in Macedonia and Albania.
To the President of the United States.
By Elie Wiesel

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The Honorable William J. Clinton
President of the United States
The White House

Mr President:

What does one say, what can one do, when a man whose emaciated face resonates ancient wisdom and pain, describes a scene whose horror invades your soul? In his prison, policemen made fathers and sons beat one another under the threat of death.

He looked at me, waiting for a sign that I understood.

And what does one do, what can one say, when an old man with sad eyes remembers how he and another prisoner survived the massacre of two hundred prisoners? His son was among them.

His voice was soft, little more than a whisper.

They all spoke quietly, haltingly, stopping in the middle of a sentence, as if despairing of the power of words to convey what they had lived. A young father who had witnessed the murder of his brother began describing the event but could not go on. Then, in their own way, his tears became his words, luminous, tragic words.

In this haunted world of Kosovo refugees, adults wept. Children did not. They sang. They played games. They laughed. And

I no longer know what hurt us more: the children's laughter or their parents' tears.

As for their tormentors, you try to understand: how could human beings cause such agony to other human beings? Is this the lesson of our outgoing century: that it is human to be inhuman?

It is to see and hear these victims of contemporary barbarism, Mr President, that you asked me to visit the Refugee camps in Macedonia and Albania. What I saw and heard there was often unbearable to the survivor that still lives in my memory. In fact, I never thought that I would hear such tales of cruelty again. Now I must share them with you in this brief report which began in anguish and ended in qualified, vacillating hope: while I sat at my last session with former prisoners of Milosevic's police, the Yugoslav parliament approved NATO's conditions for surrender.

Accompanied by three able US government officials, our journey took us to the following camps: Blace, Cegrane and Stenkovec in Macedonia, and Shpitali and Hamallaj in Albania. Driven by brutal forces of implacable terror, more than a hundred thousand Kosovars have passed through these tents that stretch for miles to the blue horizon and beyond. The suffering of the Kosovars is of biblical magnitude: it leaves the visitor stunned and wounded. Yet, they miraculously maintain their human dignity. Families live together, children obey their parents and, in many cases, the spirit of solidarity prevails.

Thanks to the impressive devotion of hundreds of NGO representatives and volunteers from various Jewish, Christian and secular humanitarian agencies, most refugees manage to go on with their lives in spite of their constant longing home. Their main problem is getting up in the morning to begin the routine of another day, another week, perhaps another year: uncertainty has always been the Refugees' worst nightmare. "How long will we be here?" they kept on asking us. "When can we go back home?"

And to think that, not long ago, these people dwelled in their own houses, cultivated their own gardens, walked freely to the woods and villages of their own land, attended weddings and reunions. Only yesterday they were useful citizens of their communities, nurturing dreams for their children's happiness. Now evolved outside time, waiting for others to make the decisions that determine the course of their lives.

I went from camp to camp, from tent to tent, listening to men and women of all ages and social spheres. Whispering or shouting, all enthusiastically supported NATO and its air operations, even though they may have accelerated Milosevic's program of destroying their grounds and their lives. "It's his responsibility, not NATO's," one school teacher remarked." Another added: "It's like the Allied bombing of France during D-Day: the attacks caused damage, but the Frenchmen were angry at the Germans, not at the Americans."

I listened to their tales of senseless cruelty and inhumanity which characterized Milosevic's army and police; they have been

reported in the international media. Still, it is different to hear it first-hand. One feels frustrated and powerless in their presence. And embarrassed. Pristina and Pec, Djakovica and Cecelija, Mitrovica and Glogovac, Kuraz and Izbica: eye-witnesses brought back harrowing detailed graphic reports from Kosovo's killing fields. They go on and on. Forced expulsions, houses looted, villages burned, insults, threats, imprisonment, repeated rapes of young women, beatings of young men, separation of men and women, summary executions: everywhere, the process is the same. And the tormentors...who are they? Most of them are former neighbors.

The saddest of all are the liberated prisoners. These men of military age were subjected to the cruellest agonies; tortured, both mentally and physically, their humiliation had one goal: to deprive them forever of their dignity and hope. In some prisons, more than a hundred men were jammed into one airless narrow cell, hungry and thirsty for days and days. "A policeman came with his 5-year old son," a man with an extraordinarily kind face told me. "He pointed at us and asked the boy to choose the prisoner to be beaten that morning." Some had been forced to sign false confessions of belonging to the KLA. Or to give up all their belongings, jewels and foreign currency.

After several weeks in inhuman prison conditions, those who were expelled to the border still don't know the fate of the families they had left behind. Their plight made me think of Job. But even he was allowed to keep his wife with him; not they. They were cut off from all those near to them. "My two-month old baby,"

one young former prisoner with gray hair said. "They threw him to the ground. And..." He broke into sobs.

Now President Slobodan Milosevic is on his knees but his victims will not soon forget his crimes against their humanity. No one doubts that the orders of ethnic cleansing originated from within the highest authority in Belgrade. Their bitterness, indeed their hatred for him and his subordinates, will not fade away. Consequently, I believe that NATO forces will have to remain in Kosovo for a lengthy period of time in Kosovo to prevent new outbreaks of violence--this time committed by today's victims against yesterday's perpetrators.

With your kind permission, Mr President, I would like to share with you some of my thoughts regarding future policy:

1. Whatever is being envisaged for the protection of the returning refugees must include a strong US presence: the Refugees place their greatest hope in America's leadership.

2. Priority should be given the return of refugees to Kosovo--even it means to the ruins of their homes--before the cold winter sets in. Winterized barracks could be erected in their own cities and villages with the same facility as in the camps.

3. Immediate international security should be provided to protect the existing camps. In some of them, outside underworld groups have infiltrated them, leading to a variety

of crimes including the selling of young girls as prostitutes abroad.

4. It is urgent for a program for a new, enhanced Marshall Plan to be elaborated so as to rebuild Kosovo first, and post-Milosevic Yugoslavia later.

5. A White House Symposium with spiritual and moral leaders, under your chairmanship, Mr President, would be useful: it could help devise a practical plan for bringing together the two ancestral enemy communities in Kosovo.

6. American and other western psychiatrists and therapists ought to be brought into camps now, and to Kosovo later, to train local colleagues to help children and adolescents cope with repressed traumatic memories of violence, hate and humiliation.

In conclusion, Mr President, may I thank you for granting me the opportunity to go to bear witness; to remind the victims of an evil regime that they have not been forgotten. These refugees, Mr President, are grateful to the United States and its President, and to NATO too, for the efforts that have been made on their behalf.

Was my mission successful? I think it was meaningful. Certainly to me and, possibly, to those with whom I had personal contact.

Is there hope for Kosovars in the Refugee camps? There was a sense of hope. It came from America and its allies. Our victory over Milosevic's crimes remains their hope.

With profound respect,

Yours sincerely:


Elie Wiesel

P.S.

My mission would have been less satisfying had it not received the fullest cooperation of the National Security Council, the State Department, the US military and the local US Embassies. They went out of their way to be helpful. They bring honor to our country.

In Skopje, we had dinner with Macedonian President Kiro Gligorov. He shares many of your views and commitments. In Tirana we were received by President Raxhap Mejdani and Prime Minister Majko Pandeli. Both support our policy and its goals.