

## Peace and Public Health: 1999 Kosovo Experience

Thousands of Kosovar Albanians expelled from their homes were awaiting yet another night in the camp. To many of them, the damp and cold tents on the Stenkovac airfield and monotonous bread and water diet were, however, a substantial improvement after days or weeks on the roads or in the muddy makeshift camp Blace, without any shelter, supply, or sanitation. At the sunset of April 23, 1999, the distribution of bread and other food items in Stenkovac was being suspended until the next day. Luckily, there had been no rain during the day, but the night to come was going to be stony cold. Well off were those who had a plank of wood, a corrugated cardboard or a blanket to sleep on. Most people, however, tried to get some rest lying on the muddy and frozen soil inside the tents. Mothers could only offer the shelter of their body warmth to their babies, not even having access to warmed water for cleaning them or preparing formula food.

After sunset, NATO forces continued the bombardment of Kosovo and Serbia under the cover of darkness. The invisible and unlighted fighter airplanes traversed the border at Stenkovac all night long and could only be heard, together with the anti-aircraft gunning from the land. Air-raid alarm started in Novi Sad, and once again mothers took their children to the shelters. A baby was born in the Stenkovec tent hospital and another one in a Novi Sad shelter. Both were welcomed by the sound of exploding shells, steaming breath of the midwives in the cold night, trembling light of a torch, and bitter taste of smoke from open fires – a very unpleasant and unhealthy first impression of the world. Both babies, not knowing anything about history or politics, were at high risk of losing their lives. It seemed almost incredible that this was happening in Europe in the last year of the 20th century, 13 years after the Ottawa Declaration.

The Ottawa Charter for Health Promotion from 1986, points out that peace belongs to the fundamental conditions and resources for health, together with shelter, education, food, income, a stable eco-system, sustainable resources, social justice, and equity (1). Peace is indeed the paramount precondition for health and consequently, the escape or migration of populations endangered by war and violence is a downright act of prevention.

Dr Gro Harlem Brundtland, Director-General of the World Health Organization, made the following statement on human rights, security, and health on December 8, 1998 (2): "WHO will step up its advice

in health sector reform. In doing so, we will draw on the key values enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Health security is a challenge that encompasses many of the rights enlisted in the Declaration. It means universal access to adequate health care, access to education and information, the right to food in sufficient quantity and of good quality, but also the right to decent housing and to live and work in an environment where known health risks are controlled."

Finally, in his remarkable 2001 Nobel Prize Lecture, Kofi Annan, Secretary General of the United Nations, called for respect, conflict prevention, and development of human rights (3): "We understand, as never before, that each of us is fully worthy of the respect and dignity essential to our common humanity. We recognize that we are the products of many cultures, traditions and memories; that mutual respect allows us to study and learn from other cultures; and that we gain strength by combining the foreign with the familiar."

The UN Secretary General also pointed out the very individual responsibility of every single human being in conflict prevention (3): "A genocide begins with the killing of one man – not for what he has done, but because of who he is. A campaign of "ethnic cleansing" begins with one neighbour turning against the other. Poverty begins even when one child is denied his or her fundamental rights to education. What begins with the failure to uphold the dignity of one life, too often ends with a calamity for entire nations."

Prevention of hatred and violence certainly turns out to be an obligation for every human and, beside all therapeutic mandates, to be a noble and principal commitment for the medical profession at large.

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- 1 World Health Organization. Ottawa Charter for Health Promotion. First International Conference on Health Promotion. Ottawa: WHO; 1986. Available at: <http://www.who.int/hpr/archive/docs/ottawa.html>. Accessed: February 13, 2002.
- 2 World Health Organization. Director-General sets out WHO stance on health and human rights. Geneva: WHO; 1998. Available at: <http://www.who.int/inf-pr-1998/en/pr98-93.html>. Accessed: February 13, 2002.
- 3 Kofi Annan. Nobel Prize Lecture: we can love what we are, without hating what – and who – we are not. 2001 Dec Available at: <http://www.un.org/News/Press/docs/2001/sgsm8071.doc.htm>. Accessed: February 14, 2002.