

# The Kosova experience—in the Department of Human Services

## South Australia

### Introduction

During the first few months of 1999 Australia watched as the world media reported on the crisis situation in Yugoslavia. On 24 March NATO began its air bombardment targeting Yugoslavia. At this time, over one million of Kosova's 1.8 million ethnic Albanians had been displaced from their homes. Many of these people flooded into townships and camps in the southern border regions of Albania and Macedonia. Human rights organisations and aid agencies were having little impact on the enormous calamity that faced them. The focus of their work was to care for refugees.

This overwhelming and threatening situation and the emerging human disaster caused Western Governments (including Australia) to consider drastic action. In the South Australian Department of Human Services (DHS) we theorised about how agencies would assist in these circumstances. As a recovery coordinator in DHS I didn't expect the United Nations to agree to a mass movement of displaced people off shore. I assumed our questions were academic and that we would watch from a distance as the Northern Hemisphere managed the largest exodus of people

by Jill Coombe, Project Officer,  
Department of Human Services (Family &  
Youth Services), coordinating welfare and  
community services activities for the  
Adelaide Safe Haven

from one nation since World War II.

How wrong could I have been!

The following paragraphs illustrate how DHS received the news of its requirement to be involved in Operation Safe Haven and how we planned to assist the people of Kosova. This is also an opportunity to document how the combination of State and Commonwealth agencies and the goodwill of the SA community combined to provide a well coordinated, effective response to people's needs.

### Planning

An international picture was developed of those most at need and at risk—women, female led households, children, the elderly, the sick, the malnourished and the disabled. There was also a greater than usual need for assistance for urban people trying to cope in rural surrounds.

The sheer volume of people arriving on a daily basis at temporary aid camps

created enormous logistical problems and health concerns.

The Australian Government decided to assist the aid program by offering temporary relief and accommodation in Australia for a small number of the displaced people. In the first week of April 1999 the Minister for the Department of Immigration and Multicultural Affairs (DIMA), Phillip Ruddock MP, announced to the nation that the Commonwealth Government would provide safe haven to refugees evacuated from the troubled region of Kosova. Operation Safe Haven would see approximately 4,000 people evacuated to Australia over a six-week period.

At this time, anyone involved in the evacuation and reception of victims began working overtime to consider the service ramifications. It was a difficult task to imagine what services would be required for an as yet unknown group of people via a group of agencies not yet identified.

South Australia received notification of possible 'activation' for this operation via Emergency Management Australia. The State Disaster organisation in SA forwarded the information to the Department of Human Services Chief Executive for action. Meanwhile DIMA were considering which site might be most appropriate as a Safe Haven (if indeed we were to receive any evacuees). The Department of Defence (DoD) was considering the same question.

DHS in South Australia incorporates a wide range of State Government agencies and authorities (health, housing, welfare) and it seemed appropriate for the Premier to nominate the Chief Executive to be the coordinator of all SA Government agencies to ensure the most effective response to this operation.

It took DHS several days to come to terms with the possible services requirements, and indeed, the enormity of the operation, logistically, politically and from a management and coordination perspective.

Initially the Chief Executive elected to work with a small team of emergency management and executive staff, to quickly identify:



A banner in the dining room at the Adelaide Safe Haven

- emergent needs
- what exactly was the 'Whole of Government' brief
- all the agencies that might need to be involved from an early stage
- communication and information priorities and issues.

At the initial meeting Dr Rod Givney was delegated the responsibility for coordinating medical services and I was given responsibility for coordination of all other DHS services and maintaining communications with agencies.

This meeting also identified a Pandora's box of issues and considerations that, in isolation, caused little concern in the normal working day, but confronting us altogether over a short period, would leave us with more than one headache. Issues included:

- community focus on what people will need (not just food and shelter) for an unknown period of time
- liaison with Commonwealth agencies and non government organisations we had no previous experience with
- keeping the Premier involved and informed on a politically sensitive and volatile topic
- preparing guidelines for on site service delivery with no benchmarks or previous experience in a Haven situation
- finding out what other States were doing/planning
- at the same time as planning to provide services planning for people to return home
- planning for a 'camp' environment in one of two possible locations (one a remote outback Defence facility, the other an inner metropolitan Defence training facility)
- did we have the expertise to provide cultural awareness training about Kosovars
- intense media interest well before arrival day (with positive and negative reactions to cope with)
- short notice of arrival
- community groups actively pursuing fundraising well before numbers and profile of the group were known
- security and identification of displaced persons, staff and visitors to the Haven and outside of the Haven
- staff offline to manage and participate—who, how many, how long
- appropriateness of Haven site—length of stay, access to outside services, on site service delivery requirements, transport, comfortable environment
- interpreters—who, how many, where from, payment, rosters
- budget

- priority of other agencies to be involved (maintaining core business and mainstream services for general population and refugees from other places).

### Agency profiles and responsibilities

By 30 April we had called together representatives from a wide range of organisations to brief them on our information to date and request assistance for particular services. The core group of agencies that we liaised with, and their roles were:

- Office of Multicultural and International Affairs (OMIA)—interpreters (training, screening, availability, employment, on site involvement, initial selection and reception of refugees). OMIA and DIMA had already met with representatives of the SA Albanian Community
- Department of Premier and Cabinet (DPC)—managing the media contact on behalf of State agencies, timing of briefings for the Premier, requesting special assistance and support outside of normal business
- Department of Treasury—monitoring State expenditure on the operation, liaising with Commonwealth agencies on funding arrangements
- English Language and Literacy Services

(ELLS)—contracted by DIMA to provide on site education, information and child care services for adults and children. (We had an initial discussion with the Department of Education, Training and Employment about the facilities and services available close to potential havens, however, we were required to provide all of these services on site)

- Passenger Transport Board—transport availability and assistance
- Red Cross—already receiving calls from the Albanian Community in SA wishing to trace relatives. Red Cross registered all offers of volunteer work and processed all donations. Red Cross in SA has a strong Community Services branch and was able to offer a wide range of personal services
- SA Police—security, civil disturbance, education, to deal with potential offences on and off site
- Migrant Health—able to assist with existing programs and provide primary health assessments to quickly determine health status and needs.

### Clear roles

By the end of April it had become apparent to each of the agencies involved that a clearly identified structure was required. With such a large number of



*A handmade quilt and gift basket were placed on each bed for arrival day*

State, Commonwealth and non-Government agencies contributing the co-ordination and communication was beginning to waiver. We worried about maintaining the momentum and ensuring the quality of our contribution.

On 7 May 1999 DIMA called a meeting of key agencies and we held the first Safe Haven Executive. This small group was to be the key to improved communication, decision making and delegation throughout Operation Safe Haven in SA.

The Safe Haven Executive was made up of South Australian executive heads of DIMA (chair), DoD and DHS. The terms of reference for the Executive were to manage, coordinate and take responsibility for the following:

- DIMA
  - Liaison with Albanian Community
  - Reception Arrangements
  - Religious Observance
  - Tracing
  - General Media Liaison
  - Financial Assistance
  - Cultural Awareness
- DoD
  - Safe Haven management
  - Defence Media Liaison
  - Identification and Security
- State Government (led by DHS)
  - Community Services
  - Recreational Activities
  - Welfare
  - Interpreting and Translating
  - Education, Resources and Information
  - Health and Medical Services

The Executive gave priority to the operation over the initial weeks to expedite the work of the teams.

Friday 7 May was also the day that Intake 1 arrived at East Hills, near Sydney (the initial reception centre). At this stage SA continued to prepare for the imminent arrival of up to 132 people (the declared capacity of Hampstead, the preferred site).

### Communication

We were in rumour filled times during May. Each day the media and the Premier's office would phone to ask if our Kosovars were in the country, how many were coming and the time of the flight. It was clear that it would be difficult to maintain control and accuracy of arrival details and numbers with so much speculation.

Given the media had been taken on a tour of inspection at the Hampstead site, they were keen to keep the SA public on the edge of their seats, ready to surge forward with acts of kindness and goodwill at a moment's notice.

DIMA appointed a Media Liaison

Officer for these early days to assist those agencies grappling with this pressure. By mid May we had news from Brighton, Tasmania.

Brighton had led the way into the unknown world of Safe Havens and we appreciated their willingness to share their experiences and help us to prepare. We noted the following with interest:

- heavy smoking amongst residents (even some children)
- not fervently religious as expected
- considerable late night activity due to interrupted sleep
- big demand for coffee and sugar.

Our call-out lists were up to date and it was not possible to carry any more communication tools – beepers, pagers, mobiles. We were as ready as we were ever going to be (without knowing how many and when!).

### Training

Receiving displaced persons or refugees is the pass time of a select few staff—we knew we would need some sort of training. We attended a cultural awareness briefing from specialists in the torture and trauma counselling field. We were also given some background information on the Kosovar people, their history and lifestyle.

This session was provided for anyone who was likely to be working on site at the Safe Haven. We cautiously accepted a list of common phrases and began to practice our 'good mornings'. Albanian is not a common language to learn at school and we struggled with the most basic conversation.

Our efforts to familiarise ourselves with the Albanian language proved invaluable as we later encountered unusual reactions to situations and heard stories we thought were not possible. It helped 'lay workers' to cope better when dealing with traumatised people and made people laugh as we tried to speak some of their language.

### Safe Haven facilities

The initial consideration of two sites in South Australia required some critical attention to detail. Representatives from Safe Haven Executive agencies visited both sites to determine their suitability and to assist the DoD and DIMA in the final decision.

Woomera, at the time, was a Defence facility in the remote north of the State, supporting the US Joint Defence Facility at Narrungar (since closed this activity). Woomera provided a large amount of accommodation, community facilities (sport, recreation, religious), education

and medical facilities and an opportunity for a small rural population to 'sponsor' the Kosovar group.

Hampstead was an inner suburban Defence facility about 6 kilometres from the CBD in Adelaide. Hampstead is utilised for Reserve training and accommodation.

Although Hampstead would only accommodate about 130 people and had limited additional recreational/activity buildings, it was in the metropolitan area. Staff, volunteers and the Albanian community would be able to resource the Haven much more readily than Woomera. In addition, access to a wider range of mainstream medical and community health services was possible.

### Arrival

Late in the day on 9 June Safe Haven Executive received confirmation from DIMA that 'our Kosovars' would arrive in Sydney in 2 days and be transferred to Adelaide on the Sunday, 13 June (a much longed for holiday weekend).

Although we had planned for two months and done all we could to be ready, it was still a shock to know they were actually coming. Numbers and composition of the group were not to be confirmed until the early hours of Sunday morning (by DIMA and Red Cross staff who had travelled to East Hills to negotiate family groupings).

DIMA had not officially notified the media at this point and the rumour needle flew off the scale with suggested arrival times, flight details and airport reception arrangements. It was a difficult couple of days quelling the excitement and anticipation.

During the previous week we had an airport reception briefing—identifying the process for the most expedient arrival and dispatch to the Haven. The reception was to include a welcome by the Premier and the head of the Albanian community.

I had worked at the Haven with the other DHS coordinator for the week prior to making last minute arrangements with DoD for facilities preparation, both of us fielding numerous calls about our readiness and capacity to cope.

The DoD had provided a transportable hut transformed to meet our requirements as a Medical Centre and I had post-it notes everywhere recording offers of assistance for all things recreational.

Red Cross had prepared the accommodation, down to the donated, hand-made quilts, flowers and gift baskets in each room.

On the wintry evening of 13 June, 147

tired refugees arrived in South Australia. From a DHS perspective, this is where the real work began.

### The good, the bad and the ugly

This national project of goodwill was not without its trials and traumas. Neither was it devoid of heart warming stories of generosity and humanitarian effort.

The SA Albanian Community, led by a man who is normally an opera singer, opened their homes to our visitors and extended a warm welcome. They provided outings, entertainment, comfort and a reminder of happier time in Europe.

As planners and service providers we asked ourselves some difficult questions along the way—like how do you support a father and mother who have shaved their daughters' heads for fear they will be violated?

We discovered hidden talent in our security guards, who quickly developed friendships with many of the residents—our mouth guard, body guard, aero guard and life guard!

We marvelled at the humility of our visitors, who at the first Residents' Committee, collectively apologised for their late arrival at the airport and thanked us for waiting. (We also held a regular women's committee to discuss food, education, child care, clothing, specific activities for women and girls.)

We could not believe their appetite for sugar—the children helping themselves to all the sugar sachets in the prestigious Mount Lofty Summit Café while the rest of us were admiring the sunset and views over the city!

We struggled with the protectiveness and embarrassment of the group as they pretended that a problem associated with a violent husband and his family, did not exist.

We delighted in the excitement of adults and children splashing in a never before experienced ocean swim—fully clothed!

The Red Cross excelled. They provided a shop for clothes, treats for children, haircuts, personal items, baby goods and birthday gifts. Their most valuable service however, was the coordination of hundreds of registered and trained volunteer hours to transport people, accompany people to activities, help in the classrooms, shop, medical and child care centres and sort thousands of items of clothing and goods.

Some of these people continue to offer support to those who remain and maintain contact with those who have returned.

Dozens of community groups and



*Security entrance at the Adelaide Safe Haven and some of the residents checking back in after attending a concert at the local church hall*

individuals donated time, money, goods and services to make our visitors feel welcome and allow them to experience South Australia's hospitality.

We were fortunate to be hosting a relatively small group and this gave us the scope to offer some memorable visits and activities.

We worked hard through a period when the first group was to return home and the Minister for Immigration had confirmed the temporary nature of their visit. School and activity attendance dropped and the Haven environment became sombre.

This was not enhanced by the need to conduct land mine awareness sessions for adults and children, anticipating their return home.

What began in South Australia as an emergency management issue escalated to an exercise in cooperation and determination by agencies to provide the best possible facility and services to a group of vulnerable people.

In the Department of Human Services we believe it has given us a valuable opportunity to exercise our skills in recovery management and develop meaningful relationships and networks with many other agencies. These liaisons can only benefit us in future times of emergency or disaster.

### South Australian Safe Haven and displaced person statistics

- Haven activated 13 June 1999, 10pm (Day 1)
- 147 arrivals (+ 1 during first month)—72 adults, 76 children (22 under 2)
- First group of 10 departed Adelaide 4 August 1999
- Nine people departed 8 September 1999
- 48 returned to Kosova by 30 September 1999
- Haven closed to remaining residents 1 October 1999, 6pm (Day 111)
- 62 elected to be billeted privately in SA rather than transfer interstate to another Haven.
- They were all due to depart Australia by the end of November 1999.
- To commemorate the use of the site as a Safe Haven all the children made a paver and they are displayed on the wall of the Mess at Hampstead.
- Haven decommissioned 11 October 1999
- 5 January, 2000 – 19 Kosovar refugees remain in Adelaide. These people continue to seek permanent asylum in Australia and must apply each month for visa extensions.