

Kosovo Journal

Everyday horror tales

It is difficult to remain detached when so many people suffer in ways most of the civilized world cannot imagine

By Fran Hesser
Special to CNN Interactive

Fran Hesser, a free-lance writer from Montana, is in Kosovo for three months to serve alongside her husband, a physician assistant, in the International Medical Corps, a volunteer relief agency. Watch for her continuing dispatches on this site.

GNJILANE, Kosovo (CNN) -- There are enough sad stories in this county to fill hundreds of books. Every day I hear more tales of death and despair. Every night I am haunted by the memories.

An old man, who lives at the high school dormitory in Gnjilane used by the International Rescue Committee to house refugees, watched his cousin being slowly hacked to death by soldiers of the Serbian-led Yugoslav army.

"First they cut off his hands, then his arms, then his feet and finally his knees, before he bled to death," an aid worker tells me.

The elderly man, a refugee from the Presheva Valley in Serbia, is a devout Muslim who is very proud of his bushy mustache, a mark of religious significance for older ethnic Albanian men. When I wanted to take his picture, he carefully groomed it before he posed -- with a big smile and horrible teeth.

The Serbian soldiers told him they were going to cut off his mustache -- a supreme insult -- before they killed him. "Kill me, but don't cut off my mustache," he begged them. For some reason a Serbian commander told him to flee, and the old man's life was spared.

A little girl at the same refugee center refused to talk for months and was terrified of men. Aid workers from the Balkan Sunflowers, a German relief organization, believe she was raped.

Now she shyly hugs Chris Wolfe, a British volunteer, who has her drawing pictures for him. Wolfe said there were twin boys at the center whose throats bear long scars from being slashed by Serbian soldiers.

The refugee center is a dismal place. Large families are housed together in single dorm rooms, sleeping in mattresses on the floor.

An electrical fire took out one whole floor of the dorm in late May. It took place during the afternoon and no one was killed.

Most of the refugees had been moved out by the IRC in recent weeks to host homes so that the dorm can again house high school students from remote villages who come to

study in Gnjilane.

There were 147 refugees still in the dorm when the fire broke out. Most were able to gather their meager belongings before the fire consumed them. Two families lost all but the clothes on their backs.

First they were burned out by the Serbians, now by accident. If it were not for bad luck, they would have no luck at all.

John Mason, a paramedic from Berkeley, California, who is volunteering with the IRC, is trying to find homes for the refugees. He has had trouble persuading some families, who have lived together in tiny dorm rooms for months, to move to new homes, most of them with host families.

The first day I was there, KFOR soldiers and U.N. police had to be called to the shelter to force out some of the families.