

Restless, bored, going nowhere

Refugees try to keep busy

By STEFAN ALFORD
Staff writer

SKOPJE, Macedonia — At night, the lights of Macedonia's capital city are clearly visible from the Brazda refugee camp just 15 miles away.

They canvas the landscape in a reminder of a civilization lost to the 27,000-plus ethnic Albanian refugees huddled around small campfires outside of their weather-worn tents. The Kosovars rub their hands over the darting flames, speak in whispers and occasionally find themselves staring over the horizon at the millions of gleaming bulbs that illuminate the distant hills.

But the lights of Skopje might as well be as far away as the stars overhead when viewed through the diamond-shaped wire designs of a metal fence.

"It's terrible to live here. I would like to go somewhere else," said Bislim Azemi, who has been in the camp almost two weeks after fleeing his home in Ferizaj. He knows, however, that there's nowhere else to go for the moment.

"I can't leave, so I wait. I wait every day. There is nothing else to do," he said in clear English learned from studying the language in college.

Finding things to do is a common concern for those languishing in the largest of the Macedonian refugee camps as NATO air strikes continue to pound Serbian territory in an attempt to force a peace agreement and return the displaced Albanians to their homes.

During the day, the Brazda camp is abuzz with U.N. relief activities as food, medicine and personal hygiene necessities are dispensed.

The wide, main dirt paths between the rows of tents generally are clear as aid workers tend to their jobs, but when darkness falls, the congestion becomes almost that of a state fair or carnival as thousands of people walk elbow-to-elbow slowly from one end of the camp to the other and back again.

Some walk just to move around, the activity helping to keep them warmer than lying in their tents and feeling the evening chill seep in. Others walk for the exercise or to scan the faces in the wandering crowd for friends and relatives. It's not uncommon to hear names called out and see hugs exchanged, followed by small talk, nods, well-wishes and a return to the ambling stream.

Ilymi Bosnjaku's nightly walk is shorter than most. His pacing takes him 20 yards from his tent and then back. He doesn't want to go too far from his wife, Sabile, lying ill inside. The 49-year-old woman had spent the last five days in a German field clinic because of kidney problems.

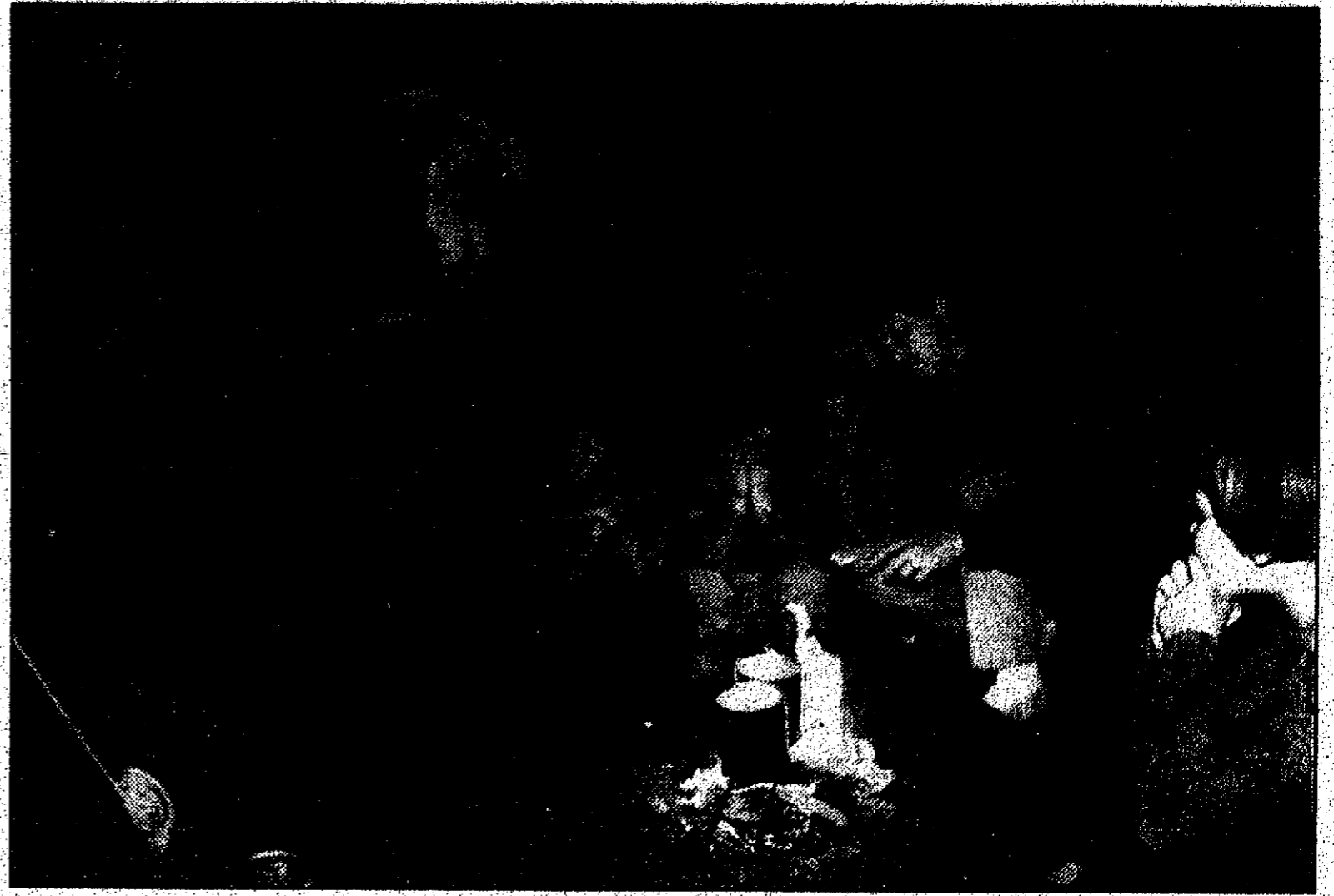
"At least they gave her a cot, so she's not sleeping on the ground," Bosnjaku said. "We hope to leave in a day or two to England or Germany, where we have sons living."

In addition to just walking around, sports are also a popular nightly event, despite the lack of adequate lights or proper equipment.

"Every night we have games," said one 30-ish-looking man watching a volleyball match being played using an old soccer ball and a stretched-out clothesline. Four stand-alone basketball hoops and a pingpong table near the camp's center also provide recreation for many older refugees. Younger children, meanwhile, kick around dirty, half-inflated balls to pass the time. Nobody, it seems, wants to go to sleep before they are tired enough not to care that the ground is hard and the air is cold.

A long row of teen-agers lines an old clamshell hangar, once part of the small Stankovic airfield and now used by relief agencies to store supplies. They lean against it and quietly smoke their cigarettes.

Not more than 50 feet away, a small shack operated by an Albanian company in Macedonia has just opened for business. It sells cakes, pretzels, bubble gum, lighters and cigarettes. Cartons



Residents of the Brazda refugee camp gather around a fire as the night settles in. The evening hours magically draw refugees out of their tents, and they begin to socialize. S&S photos: Ron Alvey

and cartons of smokes are stacked inside.

"It's crazy," notes one visitor to the camp. "Most of the people here don't even have any money."

Still, those who do crowd around the booth. Commerce goes on.

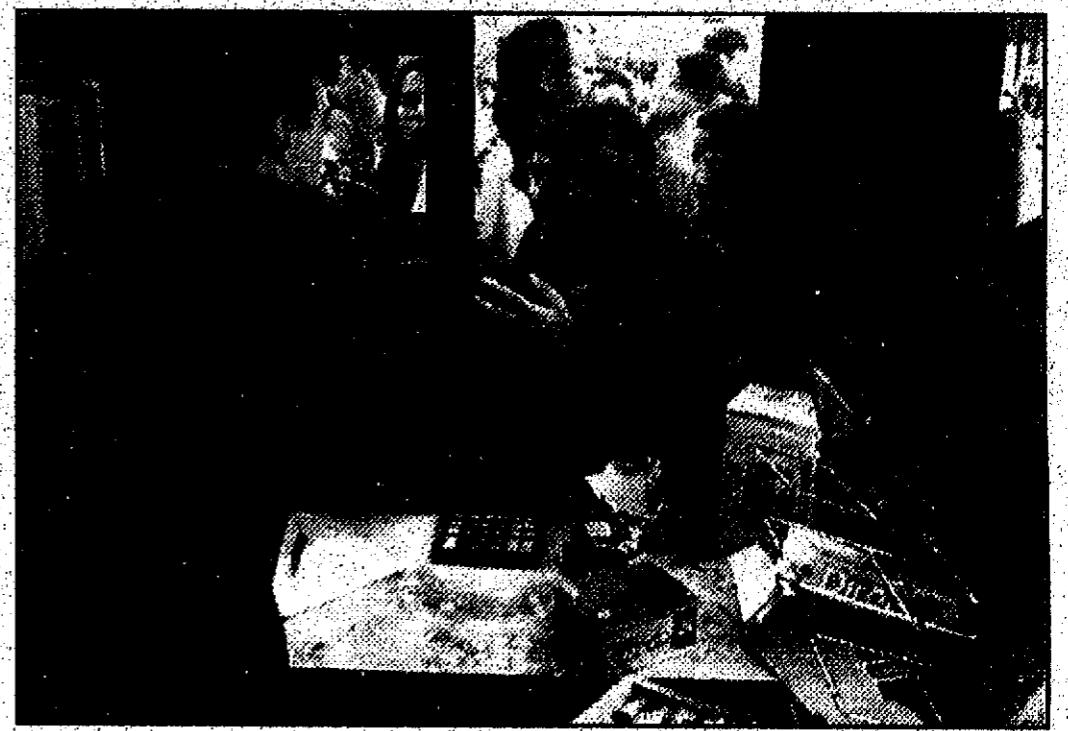
Night also is when the refugees find their way to the information boards posted near the camp's entrance.

It's here that lists of updates are pinned with flight information for the following day: names of those fortunate enough to be put on humanitarian evacuation flights to other countries.

This evening, about 100 names are listed for a flight to Austria and about 75 more for a flight to Sweden.

Next to those postings is one for lost children in the camp — those who arrived without parents. Nearly 100 names are typed on it, but there is nobody waiting here to read this list.

Eventually the small, flickering



Commerce has set in at the Brazda refugee camp. Within the past two days, a couple of stands selling candy, cigarettes and alcohol have appeared at the camp.

cigarettes are all smoked, the campfires are burned out and the masses tiredly wander back in the blackness to their own temporary shelters. And in the distance the lights of civilization continue to shine brightly.

Airdrops risky business for refugees and pilots

By RICHARD ROESLER
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TIRANA, Albania — Despite reports that thousands of ethnic Albanians have fled into the mountains of Kosovo with little or no food, it is still too dangerous to consider airdropping food to them, World Food Programme officials said Thursday.



Murray

The United Nations agency, which is bringing in 6,000 tons of food a month to Albania, reported it had no firsthand information on the food situation in Kosovo. But officials said the last major influx of refugees who came over the border last weekend were exhausted and

hungry.

"They were so weak they could not open the wrapping on the high protein biscuits," said John Murray, of the WFP, the

largest international food aid organization.

Murray described aid workers tearing open the packets and placing the biscuits in the hands of the refugees, who devoured them. "They were people who had obviously not eaten for some days."

At a NATO briefing in Brussels, Belgium, on Wednesday, spokesman Jamie Shea said there might be 1,052,000 ethnic Albanians still inside Kosovo, where the borders to surrounding countries have remained mostly closed since last weekend. Of those, Shea said, 850,000 are believed to have been forced from their homes and are facing food shortages.

He said some 3,000 to 7,000 people are thought to be gathered at the Macedonian border, unable to cross from Kosovo into the relative safety of Macedonia. They are believed to have little or no food or water.

But it's still not practical for Kosovo airdrops, which involve slow-flying aircraft at relatively low altitudes, Murray said. Both conditions would make the aid planes a relatively easy target for Serbian anti-aircraft fire.

The agency has teams that specialize in

food to hungry refugees and has done so in Africa and Bosnia, said David Kaatrud, a senior logistics officer for WFP. But it's not just a matter of pushing food out the back of a plane, he said.

"The issue is going to be security on the ground, the possibility of mines (for people coming to get the food)," he said. "You don't want to be dropping on people, and you don't want to just drop it and it ends up on the black market."

"But there is likely to be a need for airdrops," he said, "whether it's now or later."

Kaatrud said NATO is also providing additional trucks to WFP, and the agency hopes to get additional air cargo deliveries by NATO aircraft.

Also, he said, NATO is advising the



Kaatrud

houses.

There have been reports that up to 70 percent of the food coming into the country is being stolen by Albanians. Murray scoffed at that, saying the agency is confident that its shipping and warehousing arrangements are secure. But he acknowledged that there may be some individuals selling their rations to get other supplies or money.

The agency is trying to arrange for more warehouse space in the northern areas of Albania, which are some of the poorest areas of the country and where the largest concentrations of refugees are situated.

The agency, anticipating a large-scale, long-term effort to feed the Kosovo refugees, is setting up a four-week supply in warehouses at the port of Durres and another four-week supply aboard ships in the Adriatic Sea. Murray said they're also appealing to donors for another 12 months' of aid for Kosovo because even if the refugees are repatriated, it's expected that they'll need to be fed while they settle.

"At the moment," said Murray, "it looks