

## **Aid Sold in Markets**

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Questions are being asked whether donations of food and clothes collected for displaced Serb families are reaching their destination.

In the market in the northern half of divided Mitrovica, shoppers browse through clothes and food piled high on stalls and sold at knockdown prices.

In front of a shabby tin kiosk, under a freshly-painted sign reading "Sale", a housewife pauses before buying six pairs of trainers. In a Belgrade department store, they would fetch at least 180 euro – here they are going for just 20.

The price is low because these trainers were never intended for sale. They are humanitarian aid, donated by trusting Serbs who were eager to help their ethnic kin who were driven from their Kosovo homes by Albanian extremists in mid-March.

The salesman selling trainers in Mitrovica said that when the aid started arriving from Serbia, a friend working as a local volunteer at the Red Cross telephoned and gave him some goods.

"I know this is for the displaced people, but I have to make a living," he said.

Assistance began to flood in after a high-profile Serbian television campaign asked businesses and individuals to send aid and money to help the displaced families following the March 17-18 violence. The goods have been channelled through the Serbian Red Cross - the only organisation here authorised to handle distribution of donations.

According to the Red Cross, around 400,000 kilogrammes of food and a further 100,000 kg of toiletries - as well as power generators and kitchen equipment from Russia and other items sent from the German Red Cross - have been delivered to families in need.

But Belgrade has admitted that some unauthorised "leakages" of donated food and clothing have occurred without the knowledge of the Red Cross.

Last week, the Serbian parliament's committee for Kosovo said it would ask the finance ministry to supply paperwork pertaining to aid collection and distribution, in order to investigate alleged corruption.

The head of the Serbian Red Cross in Kosovo, Bora Moracic, maintains that none of his employees have sold any of the donated goods, and maintained that the complaints were coming from a small number of very vocal families.

"There isn't a single Serb enclave to which aid wasn't sent. We strictly control the distribution. But there is always someone who is dissatisfied," he said.

"Everything we have received, we first give to the displaced people and then to other [Serb] households in

Albanian-dominated regions who are unable to earn anything or buy things they need."

However, at Grace, 20 kilometres north of Pristina, village representative Bista Staniskovic insisted they had not received a single delivery from the Red Cross.

"There are around 150 of us here and no one has brought us anything," he told IWPR. "We got absolutely nothing."

Kosovo Serb leader Oliver Ivanovic told IWPR that he has received numerous complaints about lack of aid from displaced families, but it was hard to verify their claims. "I cannot confirm anything until I see concrete evidence of mishandling of humanitarian aid," he said.

While Moracic strongly backs his full-time employees, other officials concede that it is more difficult to control volunteer staff. For example, Kosovo Red Cross secretary Dragisa Murganic told IWPR he did not have information about how many volunteers had been taken on since March.

The difficulty in tracking aid from source to destination was illustrated by IWPR's attempt to find out what happened to charity collected by the Karic Foundation, one of the largest collection agencies, which hands donations over to the Serbian Red Cross for distribution.

At the time we went to press, the foundation's staff had still declined to answer questions about 50 lorry loads of aid sent to Kosovo for distribution, saying there was no time to deal with such queries.

In Mitrovica itself, the problem is less acute. Displaced people temporarily accommodated in school gymnasiums or staying with relatives say they receive free food every other day, but clothing is still scarce.

One 50-year-old man from Kosovo Polje, near Pristina, is still clad in the same trousers and jumper he was wearing when he fled his burning house.

"We got food and toiletries from the Red Cross. The one thing they still haven't given me is something to change into," he said wryly, fingering the singed material.

Another man, who was one of 400 non-Albanians expelled from Obilic, agreed that clothing was harder to come by than provisions. But he added, "My wife bought me a pair of trainers yesterday in the city. They were very cheap - only three euro..."

Tanja Vujisic is attending a Pristina-based IWPR journalism course supported by the OSCE.

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