

## **Bosnia: Suicides on the Rise**

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Bosnians traumatised by the horrors of war are being driven to suicide.

The war in Bosnia ended six years ago but left a gruesome legacy of mental disorder which only now is coming to a head with a wave of suicides.

Precise figures are hard to come by in a country lacking a state statistical bureau, but professionals working with refugees, displaced people, war veterans and youth say the post-war years have been psychologically overwhelming for many people. They blame the effects of the conflict and a bleak economic, political and social outlook.

"Everyone agrees on a few things: the increasing number of suicides, the high levels of mental disorder and the high levels of depression, anxiety and aggression," said Charles Tauber, director of the Coalition for Work with Psycho-trauma and Peace, CWWPP, a non-governmental organisation that offers mental health services in northern Bosnia and Croatia.

"The further we get away from the war, the more desperate people are becoming because they realise they won't get the help they need and they are frustrated with the system."

Anecdotal evidence abounds. On Wednesday, November 28, a woman and a man were stopped as they tried to kill themselves in the northern town of Brcko. Two days later, a 29-year-old woman from the central town of Travnik poisoned herself in her office. Local newspapers throughout Bosnia are full of such stories every day.

A dearth of mental health services, as well as a general lack of awareness about their potential benefits, compounds the problem. According to the Sarajevo daily *Oslobodjenje*, there were 179 suicides in the Bosniak-Croat Federation in 2000 and 390 in the less populous Republika Srpska, RS, where the economic situation is worse and mental health services even poorer. The article did not cite any source for these figures.

Since the end of the war, in which more than 200,000 people were killed and more than half of Bosnia's 4.2 million citizens displaced, very little has been done to address the resulting psychological traumas.

Early on, a number of NGOs tried to provide services for trauma victims. Some of them left when conflicts erupted elsewhere. Of those that remained, many changed direction so as to attract money from donors who often favour programmes designed to generate "tangible" results. "It's easier to photograph a house that has been rebuilt than a person whose mental health has been restored," explained Salih Rasavac, programme director for Corridor, a Sarajevo-based clinic that provides psychological services.

Organisations such as Corridor and CWWPP are constantly short of funds. The latter is currently operating in the red, and Tauber fears he will have to close his doors within a month or two unless he raises 10,000 US dollars through an emergency appeal.

When the funds do come through, they are often inadequate for the long-term programmes that mental health professionals say are needed. As a result, social service agencies offer short-term programmes that can only scratch the surface of the problem.

In addition, the country is seriously short of psychologists and social workers trained in the required skills. Psychiatrists tend to offer patients potent cocktails of drugs instead of the therapeutic assistance that's really needed. "You see people taking weird combinations of eight and nine drugs," said Tauber. "It's a very raw and dangerous form of treatment."

Men aged between 25 and 45 are generally thought to be the most vulnerable. Many were either victims or soldiers during the conflict and now have little hope of finding work in a country where 40 per cent of people are jobless. As a result, traditional breadwinners are unable to provide for their families, a devastating blow in patriarchal Bosnia.

"Since the end of the war, most suicides have been committed by men at their most productive period," said Rasavac. "Now, they can't work, they can't buy shoes or books for their children. The man has lost his role. He's not an important person, not a good role model. What is he? He's not a man."

Marko P, an unemployed, 32-year-old war veteran from Banja Luka, capital of RS, said he and his friends often use black humour about suicide as a way of coping with their desperation. Marko, who requested anonymity, recounted the story of a friend who took his life by detonating a grenade in the bathroom of his mother's house.

"We saw signs that something was wrong, but who could we turn to?" said Marko. He broke into bitter laughter when asked about the availability of mental health services in the RS. In the Federation, a couple of hotlines exist and the government supports some clinics although professionals say the service is inadequate.

A string of recent suicides has also raised concerns about younger people. On a recent Friday, four people in Banja Luka took their lives, bringing to five the number of suicides for the week. A teenage girl jumped from a window in her apartment; a boy shot himself with a rifle. In Sarajevo, where there is a growing drug problem, mental health professionals say young people are increasingly prone to suicide. And now a growing number of women are also taking their lives.

Resigned to their inability to cope with the problem, experts are talking about the likelihood of a "trans-generational effect" arising out of the mental health nightmare - that's to say this conflict will affect future generations. Drazenko Civcic, manager of psycho-social projects for the NGO World Vision in Tuzla, noted the popular theory that attributes the brutality of the recent war to a repressed anger stemming from World War Two.

"Untreated traumas now could result in some psychological trigger that leads people to commit crimes two years, five years, 10 or 20 years down the road," Civcic said.

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