

Kosovo: Learning to Cope in Krushe e Vogel

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After much pain and hardship, the women of this ethnic Albanian village are determined to live again.

While Hanumsha Batusha may be 77-years-old, she is still spry and energetic, and the traditions of Albanian hospitality remain important to her. She hauls out a cushion for her visitors and guides them into the shade of a cherry tree in her yard, before sitting down on the grass and smiling wearily. "I am fine," she told IWPR.

"Yet how can I be fine when I have lost three sons and five grandchildren?"

Her question expresses the dilemma of many people in Krushe e Vogel, a farming village of around 800 people in south Kosovo. No place suffered more during the war between Serbian authorities and ethnic Albanian guerrillas that ended with NATO's intervention in the spring of 1999.

On March 26 of that year, it is alleged that Serbian military, police and paramilitary forces rounded up ethnic Albanian villagers - apparently in retaliation for the NATO bombing - and drove the women and children on foot toward Albania.

It is claimed that the men and older boys were then herded into a stable and gunned down with automatic weapons before the building was set on fire. More than 100 people are reported to have died.

In the three years since the alleged massacre, the survivors have struggled to recover. Aid from international relief organisations has helped to rebuild the village, in many cases to a higher standard than before. New houses of block and concrete rise above ruins of sun-dried mud brick.

The village has also acquired a new day-care centre, a women's meeting place and a small factory that turns locally grown peppers into powder. A new primary school is ready to open this autumn.

Rebuilding lives has been more difficult, with almost every family in the village losing one or more relatives.

Krushe e Vogel is a village without men: the alleged massacre left no less than 80 widows. While the grief of the survivors has been compounded by the burden of new responsibilities, the passing of time has helped them to adjust.

"When we came back, we talked about the war and our losses all the time," said schoolteacher Shpresa Shehu, who runs the woman's centre.

"There were days when we couldn't eat anything, and while we cannot say that our sorrow has gone, we have got used to it. We have to live, to take care of the children and the houses. Somehow these things take our minds away from what happened."

A turning point of sorts for the villagers came in late spring. On June 11, two survivors of the alleged

massacre testified at the war crimes trial of former Yugoslav president Slobodan Milosevic. Coverage of the The Hague proceedings have been beamed across Kosovo on the protectorate's television station, and almost everyone in Krushe e Vogel was watching.

Most villagers already knew the details but for others, especially the village women, the broadcast from The Hague was their first chance to hear the arguments directly.

As the bodies of the missing villagers were never found, the villagers found it very hard to accept their losses.

"Somehow we hoped they were missing and would come back," said Shemsije Batusha, one of Hanumsha Batusha's daughters-in-law, who lost her husband, Milain. "However, when we heard the witnesses in The Hague tell the court how our people were killed and burned, and how only six survived, from that moment on, we realised that they were dead and would never come back."

The realisation helped the women of the village to focus their energies. In the weeks since the village's case was discussed at The Hague, Batusha and the other widows have filed death certificates with the local municipality so that they might be eligible for pensions.

Many of them had already been learning to drive, sew, plant crops, and use a computer - a skill for which there is no demand in the village but which some women deemed necessary for the modern world.

Shkurta Hajdari's husband, father and three of her uncles are among those who were lost on that fateful night. To help support her herself and the rest of the women in the family, Hajdari has earned money by sewing, and occasionally works in the village day-care centre. "Besides the money, it is good for me," she said, sitting in the twilight outside her house. "If I stay at home I will think about my loss all day."

In many ways Krushe e Vogel offers a glimpse of the problems that face all of Kosovo three years after the war. Few people have jobs, and most see little prospect of getting one. Many families farm small plots outside the village, but their produce fetches little in the glutted local markets. The flood of foreign aid that helped to rebuild the village has all but dried up.

Nor does the presence of Milosevic in The Hague give much comfort. The former Serb leader is charged with the alleged massacre in Krushe e Vogel among other crimes, but many villagers point out that he is only one of many who were responsible.

"I do feel a kind of satisfaction when I see Milosevic in The Hague," said Ramadani, who has lost two sons, one aged just 15-years-old. "But it will be a greater compensation if I see in jail the criminals who committed the crimes here."

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