

Macedonia: Tanusevci Dying Slow Death

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International agencies trying to revive a war-torn area of Macedonia may be fighting a losing battle.

In the remote and neglected-looking village of Tanusevci, in Skopska Crna Gora, there is no sign of the rebel activity or the weapons smuggling for which it was once well known.

Today, the former hot spot has taken on a ghostly appearance. Many fled Serbian attacks in the conflict in Kosovo in the late Nineties, while the rest moved to escape the fighting between ethnic Albanian fighters of the National Liberation Army, NLA, and Macedonian government forces in 2001.

In February of that year, NLA in the Tanusevci area launched their first attack against Macedonian soldiers and police, in a year-long armed conflict that threatened to spill over Macedonia's borders.

The attack followed a demarcation agreement between Yugoslavia and Macedonia, ceding Tanusevci to Macedonia, which local people bitterly resented.

The UN refugee agency, UNHCR, has been in charge of a project to rebuild Tanusevci homes damaged during the conflict so that refugees who mainly fled to Kosovo can be repatriated. Out of a total of 1500 hundred people, only 800 (180) families opted for repatriation as many have now settled elsewhere.

Lacking Macedonian passports, and concerned over the lack of basic infrastructure in the village and poor job prospects in Macedonia as a whole, many are reluctant to return.

Their only income derives from growing potatoes and illegal wood cutting which is barely enough to sustain a living in the harsh conditions that the villagers currently live in.

"This village has no prospect or a chance of any real development. Although we have been able to provide food and shelter, long term these people will seek a life elsewhere," said Jorgen Engel, local representative of the International Management Group, IMG, a body overseeing the implementation of the reconstruction work.

Engel also has some doubts as to the number of people who are actually living in Tanusevci permanently. He believes that some may have houses either in Vitina, Kosovo, or in Skopje, Macedonia, and simply use the houses in Tanusevci in the summer months.

However, when IWPR spoke to one of the residents Muhamed Musliu, who owns a rebuilt house, he said, "I have nowhere else to take my family, we all have to live in this house (12 people) and apart from potato crops, wood cutting and the cow we have been donated we only receive 2000 denars (30 euro) a month in social help."

International organisations working in the area say that one of the biggest problems they face is locals' unwillingness to cooperate.

“We are basically giving them new homes, still they treat us with suspicion and try to grab as much as they can. They steal everything.... and we work with local sub-contractors who most of the times are completely incompetent,” said Engel.

Argjent Karai, an Albanian who works as a project coordinator for IMG, told IWPR that when reconstruction began in Tanusevci, some of the locals threatened him several times, which made it difficult to start the work and jeopardised the entire rehabilitation project.

When representatives from the IMG asked one local sub-contractor why the electricity had not been installed in one of the houses, he replied that they had been too busy harvesting potatoes.

So in spite of all efforts to restore and also create a future for people in Tanusevci, the village is still in dire need of basic public services. Up until recently, it was physically isolated, especially during winter, lacking even such basic infrastructure as a paved road or bus services, but a new road has been built connecting the village to Skopje.

There is still at least seven kilometres of unfinished road leading up to the village so the isolation continues and access to public services remains a problem.

A major concern is lack of medical facilities. A doctor from Skopje is supposed to visit once a week but his visits have been sporadic till now, often because of the difficult weather conditions. Access to the village can be completely blocked in the winter months.

“We tend to go to a doctor in the nearest town, which is Vitina in Kosovo,” said Xhemail Jakupi, a villager.

Anja Simic, programme manager with a German-sponsored NGO, Malteser Hilfsdienst, which the UN authority in Kosovo has engaged to assess the refugee situation in the area, said that the biggest problem is that many Albanians don't have personal documents to prove their nationality so even when they return they will not have access to public services in Macedonia.

Efforts have been made to provide all the residents with the necessary documents but yet again they were allegedly unwilling to cooperate with the agencies on this issue. “Some were simply not interested in solving this issue,” said Engel.

Another grievance is the lack of education. The village has a primary school but for higher education, most local children again go to Vitina, crossing the border illegally every day.

This highlights another problem - the absence of an official frontier crossing for locals to use.

According to Jakupi, this creates more problems with the authorities. “We have had problems with the Macedonian border police,” he said. “They arrest and fine people and we worry about our children's safety.”

In the short term, this situation is not likely to improve for Tanusevci residents. The Macedonian army and police, and the KFOR authorities in neighboring Kosovo, all say their aim is to tighten border security, to prevent villages like Tanusevci from becoming transit points for weapons bound for Albanian insurgents.

Such measures threaten to worsen the plight of Tanusevci residents, who conduct virtually all their affairs, connected to education, health and business, over the border.

“People cross the border to see their relatives,” said Mumim Simani, another villager. “The border has split families. We have close ties with Debelde [a village across the frontier] and many fled to Kosovo during the last conflict [in 2001].”

But Simic said that although illegal border crossings still may be a problem, local priorities have now changed, “The problem is no longer physical security but life security.”

“I don’t know what the future holds. My only chance to get a job at the moment is to go to Skopje or one of the bigger cities but that means leaving Tanusevci,” said Simani.

“We try not to be beggars,” said Musliu. “ I have a brother in Vitina who wants to come here because there is no work there either, but I have nothing to offer him here.”

Notwithstanding the problems encountered by local people, there are signs that they see their future within Macedonia.

“Although we consider ourselves Albanians, we are hoping to integrate into Macedonian society now that we have representation in the Macedonian parliament,” said Simani.

Simic said the authorities on both sides of the frontier needed to do much more to encourage the integration process.

“Many believe the Macedonian government should take more responsibility for this but the pressure needs to be twofold. Kosovo institutions should put pressure on Albanians to feel responsible to the country whose passport they carry - which is Macedonia - and contribute to its development,” she said.

It seems that one area that needs to be urgently addressed is local reluctance to cooperate with international agencies.

“They [Tanusevci residents] resist any offer of help, cause as many obstructions as they possibly can and I really can’t find a logical reason for this. They don’t seem to have a genuine interest in moving the village beyond what currently exists here,” said Engel.

Locals’ somewhat schizophrenic behaviour - wanting integration on the one hand yet doing little to push it forward on the other - is not entirely surprising given the devastation inflicted on them by two rounds of armed conflict.

“We lost hundreds of livestock and thousands of [German] marks to the Serbs in the war in Kosovo,” said Jukupi. “They used to camp right over there,” he added, pointing across to a spot a few hundred meters away.

During the 1999 war in Kosovo, Tanusevci was allegedly used to funnel arms to the anti-government fighters of the Kosovo Liberation Army, KLA, and many villagers joined the KLA to fight the Serbs.

Two years on in the Macedonian conflict, the village again became a trouble spot after the NLA, an offshoot of the KLA, launched its first attack from there.

In the ensuing battle, hundreds of villagers were forced to flee their homes. Some were allegedly compelled to join the NLA or even used as human shields against the Macedonian forces.

Today, local people in Tanusevci deny any contact with militant groups. "The NLA left when the 2001 conflict ended," Jakupi said.

Notwithstanding their association with Albanian militancy, there's little indication that local grievances will spark violence. But neither is there much optimism about the future.

"As far as the future is concerned I don't really think that far, at the moment I live a hand to mouth existence," said Musliu.

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