

Macedonian Aid Row

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Albanians in Macedonia say they're not receiving their fair share of international relief supplies.

The ruined Albanian village of Drenoc, close to the town of Tetovo, has a ghostly appearance. The scars of war are clearly evident - burnt houses, empty shops and broken glass - and few people remain.

It's a familiar picture all over Macedonia, but now foreign aid is on the way to repair the damage wrought by the conflict that raged between Albanian guerrillas and government forces for most of this year.

Members of the Albanian minority, however, complain that an unfair share of this aid is being directed at Macedonian communities.

According to official sources, some 76,000 people in Macedonia have been displaced by the fighting. The UN High Commission for Refugees, UNHCR, estimates that about 27,000 have left the country altogether.

The authorities say it will take substantial financial aid from developed countries to rehouse those uprooted during the conflict. A first assessment by the EU-funded government agency, the Coordinating Group for Crises Management, TKMK, puts the figure at 20 million US dollars.

The TKMK chief, Ilija Filipovski, says priority would be given to ethnically-mixed areas and areas considered safe.

Albanian analysts say what this really means is that Macedonians will be given preference over their community. They claim Albanian-inhabited places like Tanushe, Selca, Breza and Llaca have been sidelined.

The town-planning adviser in Tetova commune, Skender Palloshi, concurred, asserting that the TKMK hasn't even bothered to assess badly hit Albanian villages in mountainous areas around Tetovo.

In Drenoc, many Albanians found shelter with relatives nearby or fled to Kosovo. The Macedonians escaped to Skopje. The former complain that the plight of the latter is loudly reported in the media while they receive very little attention.

Villages in this region suffered some of the worst damage during the conflict "Winter is coming. I have no money to rebuild my house," said an Albanian from one highland village. "I worked for twenty years in Germany to earn money to build a house in Shipkovic, but it was ruined in a second."

Another thorny issue is the return of displaced people to their homes. Macedonians say they do not feel safe unless their own troops and police accompany them. But Albanians fear the return of the military might leave them open to retaliation, and would prefer ethnically-mixed security forces.

A Macedonian from Tetovo who now lives in Skopje commented, "I prefer to stay here for the time being and just make visits to my old home." But he hopes life will eventually go back to normal.

An Albanian from Llaca, near Tetovo, said he moved to a relative's house after his own home was burnt down by government troops. He is angry that his village was excluded from the TKMK recovery project on grounds that it was unsafe.

Humanitarian organisations are distributing aid to the former conflict areas. UNHCR is contributing mostly beds, sheets and water to villages in Tetovo and Kumanovo. The relief organisation and government agencies have used high school buses to deliver the supplies. Local inhabitants welcome the deliveries, but say that with winter approaching what they mostly need is decent shelter.

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