

## **Preparing for Winter**

**Author:** [Fron Nazi](#)

With winter approaching, international agencies are rushing to ensure basic shelter, but are hampered by logistical bottlenecks and bureaucratic delays.

With winter approaching rapidly, international agencies in Kosovo are racing to provide basic shelter for 350,000 people in their own homes. Meanwhile, with 50,000 homes destroyed beyond repair, another 350,000 will have to lodge with friends and relations during the coming months.

Less than five months after the end of NATO's bombing campaign and the withdrawal of Serbian forces from Kosovo, most Kosovo Albanians who fled the Serb ethnic cleansing campaign this spring have returned to the province. As a result of logistical bottlenecks and bureaucratic delays, however, international aid has been slower to arrive.

The office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), nevertheless, believes that it is now getting aid to where it is most needed. "This is a race against time and the overall programme is running well," says spokesman, Peter Kessler. "I believe more people will freeze to death this winter in Washington D.C. than in Kosovo."

The UNHCR has prepared three different kinds of winterisation kit for houses that can be repaired. The first, a so-called roofing kit, includes beams and plastic sheeting. The second, a dry room kit, includes plastic sheeting, wood and foam. And the third, a warm room kit, includes a stove and a carpet.

The dry and warm room kits are temporary measures to help recipients through the winter. The roofing kits are intended to be a permanent solution, apart from than the plastic sheeting, which should be replaced by roof tiles in the spring.

The UNHCR says that half of the winterisation kits have been distributed with the assistance of the European Community Humanitarian Office (ECHO) and the Office for Disaster Assistance (OFDA) and that 30 different non-governmental organisations (NGOs) are also involved.

Despite the UNHCR's official optimism, many relief workers fear that the winterisation programme is behind schedule and many Kosovars will be without shelter when the first snow falls. Moreover, they point out that OFDA and even USAID's Office of Transitional Initiatives (OTI) has been drafted into the programme, even though in OTI's case, it is not mandated for such relief work.

The relief workers' fears are echoed by Kosovo Albanian officials in outlying areas, especially in parts of Western Kosovo, which bore the brunt of the Serbs' scorched earth policy.

In Mitrovica, 30 minutes' drive north of the capital, Barjim Rexhepi, who was appointed mayor by the Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA), complains that the UNHCR has failed to address the winterisation of homes adequately. "Seventy per cent of those homes that have been earmarked for assistance are not ready for the winter," he says, pointing out that the NGO Community Habitat Foundation (CHF) has been more efficient and, after conducting a survey of the area, has begun helping reconstruct 300 homes.

UNHCR classifies homes according to the degree of damage with a sliding scale of 1 to 5, where 1 is slight 5 is completely destroyed. Out of 7,200 homes in Mitrovica 30 per cent were damaged, according to Rexhepi, who says that the local authorities have a photographic record of the damage to each property.

Although the pace of winterisation has picked up in recent weeks and international agencies have made it their immediate priority, logistical and bureaucratic problems continue to slow the programme.

Most material enters Kosovo from neighbouring Macedonia by truck or by train. The UN Mission in Kosovo (UNMIK) has imposed a modest, \$1 tax on every truck crossing into the province, which is collected at the border. The Macedonian authorities, by contrast, continuously change the tax status of the humanitarian aid flowing into Kosovo, in an effort to take their own cut, with the result that international officials are regularly obliged to appeal to Skopje to let aid through.

Once the winterisation kits arrive in Kosovo, they are stored in one of the two major warehouses in Pristina and Orhovac. From there, international relief agencies collect the material and distribute it across 2,000 villages and towns. Beneficiaries are asked to sign a contract agreeing to provide shelter for up to two families, lest the material be confiscated.

In order to speed the winterisation process further, the top UN administrator, Bernard Kouchner has just introduced an innovative solution that should appeal to free-marketers everywhere. He has decided to distribute cash to locals who are yet to receive the appropriate kits and let them purchase materials themselves.

Since Kosovar entrepreneurs have proved adept at avoiding customs' duties, there appears to be no shortage of the necessary building material on sale in Kosovo. However, the immediate consequence of the new policy has been that locals have begun refusing the winterisation kits and asking for money instead.

Fron Nazi is IWPR Project Director in Pristina.

**Location:** Macedonia  
Kosovo

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