

Women Unite to Help War's Refugees

By **Judy Mann**

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Lael Stegall was in Colorado when she got a call on her cell phone from Aferdita Kelmendi, a Kosovo journalist, who had been deported to Macedonia. Through her horrendous flight, Kelmendi kept her cell phone, and she was using it to call her American friend and colleague.

"Lael, Lael," she said in her message, "I'm safe, I'm okay."

Kelmendi and Stegall are part of what Stegall calls a "magnificent network" of more than 150 nongovernmental women's organizations that are training women and promoting them into leadership positions in the Balkans. The linchpin for the effort is the STAR Network Fund, with STAR standing for Strategists, Trainers, Advocates and Resources for Women's Social Change. Based in Washington, STAR has been working with these organizations in Croatia, Bosnia, the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia and Macedonia since 1994. It is funded by the U.S. Agency for International Development, the U.N. High Command for Refugees, the World Bank and private donors.

The result, says Stegall, who is STAR's co-director, has been the emergence of "highly experienced, effective" female leaders in the region who have maintained connections with women's organizations in Serbia and have continued to work with each other throughout the conflicts. "These are women who for 10 years have been leading democratic, nonviolent social change," Stegall says. "They are peacemakers."

Two of them, Kelmendi and Vjosa Dobruna, a pediatrician, have been in the United States for the past two weeks trying to make Americans at all levels aware of the humanitarian tragedy that has befallen Kosovo's ethnic Albanians.

Their intent is to return to Macedonia, where Dobruna has already started setting up an emergency medical care facility for women and children in Tetova, near the border. Before being expelled, she ran the Center for the Protection of Women and Children in Kosovo. She hopes to open three other centers in areas with heavy concentrations of refugees. "We are determined to reconstruct our society," she said in an interview.

She is also determined to work to document abuse of women and children and to provide reproductive health care for refugees. Such care has been virtually ignored by relief agencies until the past few years. Prompted by the Rwandan crisis, women in nongovernmental organizations who work on reproductive health care in the developing world started a campaign to make this care available in camps. The State Department has estimated that 10 percent of all Kosovo refugees are pregnant, breastfeeding or caring for very young infants.

Kosovo has one of the lowest per-capita income rates in Europe, one of the highest fertility rates and one of the lowest rates of contraception use. Planned Parenthood has donated \$100,000 to the reproductive health care of the refugees, with \$50,000 going to the U.N. Population Fund and \$50,000 to the Albanian Family Planning Association. Planned Parenthood is seeking volunteers to

go to the refugee areas and help with distribution and counseling. The U.N. Population Fund is shipping emergency reproductive health supplies for about 350,000 people, with the kits containing clean delivery supplies for women giving birth, as well as emergency contraception.

The STAR Network has joined with World Learning, formerly the Experiment in International Living, to form the Kosovo Women's Fund, which will help fund Dobruna's Center for the Protection of Women and Children in Tetova .

The fund will also support Motrat Quiriazhi and her Rural Women's Network, which has been working with women on education, literacy, health and empowerment in rural villages in Kosovo for the past five years. Motrat Quiriazhi is in exile in Macedonia and will work with traumatized rural women and their families.

The third organization the fund is supporting is the Media Project, founded by Kelmendi and another veteran journalist, Xheraldina Vula. It includes Radio TV 21, an independent broadcasting operation, and the Center for Journalism and Conflict Resolution. The project will establish media and information centers in Macedonia, and Kelmendi hopes to begin broadcasting from there soon. She wants to help people find their families and to inform them about what is going on.

"I will try to get information from inside Kosovo and to inform people what is happening there," she says. The Media Project has a Web site, www.radio21.net, which has been deluged with hits. "People are desperate for information."

Kelmendi trained in conflict resolution with 24 other women from Croatia, Serbia, Kosovo and Bosnia. "In the beginning, it was hard," she says. "We didn't listen to each other. But after learning this skill . . . we found out there was another way to solve problems. In using these skills, in educating our journalists, we managed to have radio and TV stations that send peaceful messages to all people. But they didn't listen to us. They didn't get the message we wanted to send, that everything can be done in a peaceful way."

People wishing to donate to the Kosovo Women's Fund can make checks payable to the STAR/World Learning Kosovo Women's Fund and mail them to 1015 15th St. NW, Suite 750, Washington, D.C. 20005. They are tax-deductible.

"Women, throughout history, have picked up the pieces of war," Stegall says, "but this new generation of women is seeking the authority along with the responsibility. These women are leading new civil society organizations, and now in the midst of a holocaust, they are out organizing. They are not victims."

They are women of vision and great courage. They deserve our support.