Considerations in the evacuation of children from the former Yugoslavia*

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Introduction

Even as mothers in the conflict area of the former Yugoslavia, in great anguish, tell of the killing of husbands and sons, of being driven from homes or of living trapped in bombarded apartments for weeks and months, of being so destitute as having to share shoes, of having no winter clothes, of having limited water, no electricity, no vegetables or meat, still then, it is evident that they are struggling to protect and care for their children. Even in the midst of the tears mothers or fathers are likely to be holding their children close, consoling them, attending to their needs. Despite shelling, bombing, fear, shortages, misery, cold, hunger and deprivation, parents are vigilantly striving to provide love, security, understanding, guidance, consolation, food and clothing to their children. Experience in the former Yugoslavia, as elsewhere in the world, confirms that even in the most difficult circumstances parents do not easily abandon or transfer responsibilities for the care of their children, a reflection of one of the most sterling qualities of human nature.

Parental care is not always sustained. Parents and children may be involuntarily separated, if parents are killed or put in concentration camps, for example. Sometimes children are left completely on their own, as may happen when children are separated from their extended families or simply abandoned. However, because the extended family system remains vibrant and the social commitment to children strong, few children in the former Yugoslavia are currently known to be existing alone.

Sometimes, life in war situations becomes so difficult that parents consider it necessary to separate from their children. Sending the children off may be the only way to save their lives. More often children are sent away in an attempt to relieve their physical or emotional suffering. What parent would not be anguished as, day by day, their young children get thinner, pale, and are forced to experience the hardships of war conditions?

When parents do voluntarily separate from their children, they are most likely to send them to the care of trusted relatives or friends. Some parents,

* This article was first published as a joint UNHCR/UNICEF paper 'Evacuation of Children from Conflict Areas', Geneva, December 1992.

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however, have sent their children on organized evacuation schemes. Over
the last 150 years numerous evacuation programs for children have been
implemented throughout the world. These evacuations have taken many forms
— rescue effort, summer holidays, temporary rest and recuperation periods,
temporary asylum, long-term care. Indeed, in virtually every conflict situa-
tion individuals and agencies attempting to aid children debate the possible
need for the evacuation of children from war zones just as it is being con-
sidered for children in war zones in the former Yugoslavia.

In the face of continued shelling, displacement, sustained hardships, and the
threat of a winter without adequate food, clothing or shelter (which carries
with it the potential loss of large numbers of lives, particularly children’s lives),
thousands of parents in Sarejevo and throughout other conflict areas would
likely evacuate to safer areas with their children if they had the option. Lacking
opportunity for themselves, some parents are urgently attempting to send
their children out of the war areas without family accompaniment. Some
children have been evacuated by local and foreign agencies, including the
children evacuated in one widely reported effort in which several died when
their bus was fired upon during exodus. Already procedures and a system
for the evacuation of children requiring life-saving medical treatment are in
operation in Serejevo; a limited number of children have been evacuated
with the help of local authorities, the United Nations High Commissioner
for Refugees (UNHCR), the United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF),
UNPROFOR and receiving countries. Discussions continue on the criteria
for permitting evacuation of children through this program.

The evacuation of children poses serious concerns for all and the
decisions to be made are judgements. Authorities in the various conflict areas
are faced with the issue of whether or not they should organize or permit
evacuation, and if they do so, who should be permitted to leave under what
conditions. International and non-governmental organizations must decide
whether or not they should mount or support evacuation efforts. Host coun-
tries face the decision of whether or not to accept evacuated persons. Parents
must decide whether or not to attempt to evacuate as a family unit (if possible),
or to send children alone (if possible). Children’s wishes are also at issue.

By presenting a review of previous evacuating experiences and a synthesis
of few of the lessons that might be drawn from them, this article attempts
only to provide information that may be helpful to those who must decide
and act.

Evacuation experiences

The first example, the emigration of children from Great Britain, is an excep-
tion but merits mention. From 1870 to 1930, when the practice was finally
halted, more than 100,000 children were sent from Great Britain to Canada
alone (they were also sent to other Commonwealth countries) by more than