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International Medical Response to War in Bosnia and Herzegovina

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The war in Bosnia and Herzegovina (BH) that has raged since 1992 has claimed the lives of nearly 160,000 victims, and led to mass civilian displacement. The continuing war was a disturbing realization of Western acquiescence and impotence amid brutal atrocity. The conflict in BH was a war waged against public health. The health of the population was used as a weapon by the aggressors, and the medical consequences have been devastating. Contributing factors which impacted the health and survival of the country were population movements, social upheaval and economic collapse, destruction of health care system and residual environmental effects.

The international medical response to the war in BH was severely limited by the lack of decisive military response. The following is a commentary on the crisis as seen by an American physician working with the war wounded. I had the opportunity to work as a traumatologist/emergency physician at the improvised hospital in the Franciscan church (Fra Mato Nikoli} Hospital), also called the Nova Bila Hospital for War Wounded. The hospital was an excellent example of dedication and ingenuity in the face of aggression and deprivation. The experience gave me an inside view of individuals and organizations working in international health in this region torn by war. The purpose of this article is to emphasize that the effects of civil and multilateral conflicts reach far beyond those killed or injured in battle.