

“Save Lives” Operation in Liberated Parts of Croatia in 1995: an Emergency Public Health Action to Assist Abandoned Elderly Population

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Aim. Presentation and analysis of an extensive humanitarian action aimed at saving abandoned, mostly elderly people in a post-conflict situation.

Setting. After almost two years of war in Croatia, the United Nations Protected Areas (UNPAs) were established in 1992, in the parts of the country under control of the local rebel Serb population and paramilitary forces. On August 4, 1995, the Croatian military and police forces stormed the North and South UNPA zones and regained control of an area covering 10,497 square kilometers in four days. The Serbian forces fled to Bosnia and Herzegovina and the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, followed by the majority of civilians. Immediately after that, it was realized that the remaining population (about 3% of the inhabitants recorded in the 1991 census) consisted mostly of the elderly requiring a substantial external assistance to survive.

Methods. Reconnaissance, follow-up, direct assistance, and interview data regarding 10,594 persons, in 524 settlements are presented. The population was interviewed by 136 professionals and volunteers from 28 Social Welfare Centers and 14 Croatian Red Cross branches. Interview data on all 10,594 persons are analyzed.

Results. More than 75% of the remaining population were over the age of 60. They were scattered in 524 villages or hamlets, with only one inhabitant in 73 of them. One third had no income, and only about 17% were eligible for pension or welfare. Only approximately one fourth had access to public transportation or supply of goods and food, and half had electricity in their homes. Two thirds considered themselves ill, and some 6% needed emergency assistance, including a change of living conditions. The “Save Lives” operation included a “humanitarian census”, immediate financial, material, medical, and social assistance, increase in security, and a gradual establishment of contacts with families, administrative assistance, and approach to various other needs.

Conclusion. The exodus of most of the inhabitants of the area, leaving behind only 3% of the pre-war population, and the fact that most of this remaining population were elderly, has been an undescribed phenomenon so far, and thus the “Save Lives” operation presents a unique model of assistance. The military operation, first of low-intensity and long-lasting, and then an abrupt defeat of one party caused a total social collapse. The exodus of the inhabitants left behind a selected population of the elderly and helpless. Deprived of their family support network and having to deal with the consequences of the military operations significantly worsened the problems of the elderly. The humanitarian action helped substantially in saving lives, but was unable to increase security or to significantly restore the quality of life for this vulnerable group of people.

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