

Balkans Briefing  
Presidential Hall  
May 18, 1999

**PHOTOCOPY  
PRESERVATION**

THE WHITE HOUSE

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REMARKS BY THE FIRST LADY  
ON BRIEFING ON HER TRIP TO THE BALKANS

Presidential Hall

1:12 P.M. EDT

MRS. CLINTON: Welcome. Please be seated. We are very pleased to have you here for this event. I am delighted to be joined by several members of Congress—Senator Lautenberg, Senator Hutchinson, Senator Voinovich, Representative Sheila Jackson Lee. Julia Taft I see as well. Ken Hackett, the Executive Director of the Catholic Relief Services, and other members of the government and many representatives of non-governmental organizations, as well as Albanian Americans and refugees from Kosovo.

As you know, I just returned from visiting Stankovac I, one of the refugee camps in Macedonia. And it certainly was an experience that I and those who traveled with me will never, and could never, forget. I wanted to tell you briefly about what I saw and heard in my meetings there—for two reasons. First, because these heartbreaking stories of families separated, of girls raped, of men executed, of homes destroyed—these tragic stories are happening every day and happening even today. And they must be told and retold and never forgotten.

Nothing makes the case more powerfully for why the United States and our NATO allies are pursuing their mission in Kosovo, and why we cannot give up until the evils perpetrated by Milosevic and his regime have been stopped and the refugees returned home in peace and safety.

The second reason I wanted to come and speak with you today is to thank all of you. I saw a lot of extraordinarily hard work going on at that one camp in Macedonia. And I know it is being replicated in the other camps in Macedonia, and in Albania, in the relief work being carried out in Montenegro, and in many other locations where refugees are being moved. None of that would have been possible without the commitment and the compassion and the resources that so many of you have brought to bear on dealing with this humanitarian crisis.

I particularly want to thank the members of Congress who are here—we will hear from two of the senators in just a moment—and the other officials from State, DOD, HHS, INS, USAID, and others who are leading the government's response to this crisis.

And I also want to thank many American citizens, some representatives of whom are with us today. But to the literally thousands and thousands of Americans who have made contributions, who have opened their hearts and their homes and their wallets, I want to thank you.

And I'd like to highlight a few particular Americans who have made some real contributions. We have with us some students from St. Peter's Inner Parish School on Capitol Hill. They gathered over 100 emergency kits, including soap, candles and bandages, for the refugees in the camps.

There are students here from the Georgetown Day School in Washington, D.C. They are in the process of planning a school-wide fundraising effort to supplement some of their individual work. And then there are students here from Stoneridge School of the Sacred Heart, who, with a little help from a concert by Peter Yarrow, raised \$15,000 for trucks in Albania and Macedonia.

I'd like to ask these young people to stand, and I'd like to express our appreciation to them. (Applause.) I also want to thank their teachers and their parents for obviously setting such a good example for their involvement.

We're also joined today by two refugee families who are living in Manassas, Virginia. They are the first families to be relocated to the Washington, D.C., area. They were part of the first group of refugees with relatives in the U.S. to come over. I met that first group of refugees at Fort Dix and I'm delighted that we could be joined by two of the families. And we will hear from one of them, Veton Sylejmani, who will be speaking on his own behalf, on behalf of his extended family and on behalf of many other refugees.

I don't know that any of us who have not endured what these men, women and children have can really fully comprehend what they have suffered, or the courage it takes to speak about their experiences. I found it difficult in the refugee camp to ask and then listen to the stories that the refugees told me, because it's a very painful experience for them to have to relive that. But they are willing to do so because they want all of us to know what has happened to them and is still happening to their loved ones.

So I'm particularly grateful to these two families, and also to the Ethiopian Community Development Council, who has helped to make their stay as comfortable as possible.

We will also hear from the Executive Director of Catholic Relief Services, Ken Hackett, who just returned from Albania. I saw some of his colleagues at work in Macedonia and I'm extremely grateful to all of them.

As these men and women will tell their stories here today, as they told their stories to me, as they told them to the two senators on their recently concluded trip, I know that all of us have those images and those words really emblazoned in our own minds. A 63-year-old woman told me she doesn't know where her daughter and grandchildren are. After her son-in-law was killed by Serb police action in January, her daughter stayed with his parents. And then when the Serbian police came, they held guns to their throats, burned down their house, and ordered her family to leave.

She's not sure that her grandchildren and other son are still in Kosovo, but she doesn't know where they are, and hopes only that they're safe.

Another family that left their village before paramilitary forces arrived were driven from village to village before arriving in Macedonia six weeks ago. One of the men in the group talking to me cried as he remembered the funeral of one of the Albanians in the village. Serb police surrounded the mourners as they sat at the grave, threatening to kill them all, and then stripping them of their money and their valuables.

In another tent I met a man who spoke English, who told me that his wife and children had been visiting their grandfather when the Serbs arrived at his house, forcing him to leave without his family. He, too, moved from village to village and is still waiting for news of where his family is.

And in the final tent, I sat down with an extended family and listened to their stories. And maybe what affected me the most of all these horrors that were related to me was told by a woman. She told me of how, when they were being pushed in this huge crowd in Pristina, heading toward the train station, she was holding on to her children, she was supporting her mother-in-law, and her husband had other children and relatives, and they were trying to stay together. And all of a sudden she felt the hand of her older daughter slip out, and the older daughter had been holding on to two younger siblings. And she tried to turn, but she couldn't turn because she was hemmed in and the police were continuing to push them forward. She couldn't go back, she was screaming for her children; she couldn't find them. They were pushed onto the train. And there they were in a refugee camp in Macedonia, not knowing where her children are. And her husband, who went looking for them—she can't find him either.

Time and again these haunting images remind us of what is at stake and what is going on here. When I was in London with Prime Minister and Mrs. Blair, I met with two refugee families who have made their way to London, who told me how this all started. This is not something that started just a few weeks ago, nor even just last year when we saw the pictures of people being pushed into the mountains. It started as long ago as 10 years, when first Kosovars were forbidden to go to the theater or the sports stadium; then their schools were closed; then they were afraid to drive their cars on the streets because they would be stopped and harassed and robbed.

Then a couple of years ago they started being pushed out of their homes—a family at a time, a block at a time. They took refuge in the mountains. That was where we saw the first wave of refugees coming over the borders. I can remember visiting with a pediatrician who cared for those people while they were up in the mountains. And then, finally, the great expulsion that we have seen in the last two months.

When I arrived in Macedonia, I sat down with representatives from the NGOs such as CRS, UNHCR, IOC—many of the others who are on the frontlines. And many of them had been in Kosovo; they had actually been operating in Pristina and other places. So we not only have the eyewitness accounts and stories of the refugees themselves. We have the corroboration of the NGOs, who actually were there and stayed there as long as they could, until they, too, were ordered out or required to leave for their own safety.

It was very sad to hear them talking about how they felt so bad leaving their colleagues in the medical offices they had set up, in the food relief operations they were running. And they, too, were searching to make sure that they knew what had happened to them.

But now, here they are. They're in Macedonia, they're working together, they are literally coming from all over the world. I saw an Israeli organization, called Israeli Council for Youth Movements, who helped give the young people something to do in the camps. The children can now attend UNICEF-run schools. The German Red Cross was running a hospital there. Medical teams have arrived from everywhere from France to Taiwan. An Iranian group has even cooperated by installing a portable shower. I mean, this has been an outpouring of humanitarian relief from every kind of country, from every part of the world.

But the bottom line is these people want to go home. I mean, no matter how well organized these camps are becoming and how many more services are being provided, they want to go home. And I'm very hopeful that we'll be able to see that come about, so that these people can return in safety and peace.

The United States' assistance to the refugees is now over \$200 million. Yesterday the Administration, with Julia Taft and others, announced \$4 million to help support Albanian and Macedonian families who are hosting refugees, who are really the unsung heroes of this refugees crisis. Because if it were not for the Macedonian and the Albanian families who have taken people into their very poor homes, then the camp crisis and the refugee problem would be even greater. So we're going to try this program on a beginning basis to help fund these families so that they can meet their own needs as well as the refugee needs.

But if we're going to fully implement what we need to do both militarily and in terms of humanitarian and economic support, then we need to have the President's supplemental budget actually signed into law so that the money can start moving. And we hope that by the end of this week, Congress will act favorably on the supplemental budget that has been negotiated.

I'm pleased to announce that today an additional \$15 million will be given to help the refugees from Kosovo. It will be given to U.N. organizations, the International Committee of the Red Cross, and other international and non-governmental organizations who are providing refugee relief. It will also help support our efforts to provide a safe haven for up to 20,000 refugees here.

I'm also pleased to announce that this week the United States will establish an Internet information center at Fort Dix, New Jersey. It's a public-private partnership headed by the United States Information Agency. It will help the refugees get information in their own language so that they can find out more about what's going on back at home and perhaps even locate missing family members.

I'm delighted that many of the computer companies who are helping to lead this effort are here with us today, and I want to thank them.

I'm also pleased to announce that Reebok is donating a thousand pairs of shoes and a thousand duffel bags to the refugees, who often arrive at Fort Dix with little more than the clothes on their back. And I'd like to thank Reebok CEO Paul Fireman for this commitment.

When Senator Lautenberg and I visited Fort Dix, the general in charge of Operation Open Arms talked about how he hoped to treat the refugees there—to welcome them to Fort Dix, as his grandparents had been welcomed at Ellis Island.

Today's announcements will make sure that we're continuing to help service the needs of the refugees, here in the United States as well as in the camps that have been established for them, and also to continue to elicit the kind of support we need from business, young people, relief organizations, government leaders, Albanian Americans, and others who are helping to make this humanitarian effort work.

It's now my great honor to introduce the person who has just headed up the congressional delegation that returned from visiting six countries in 72 hours, which is, I think, probably a record of some sort. Senator Kay Bailey Hutchinson has shown great leadership, standing up to ensure that we honor our humanitarian commitment to the refugees. And it's my great pleasure to introduce Senator Hutchinson. (Applause.)

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MRS. CLINTON: Well, I want to thank everyone who came this afternoon. I especially want to thank all of the speakers.

Those of us lucky enough to be up on the stage can look right at Veton's little child, and we can see those big eyes, and that look that babies have, about the world being just wide open to them, no matter where they're going.

And Kay and I were sitting here, remarking about how beautiful the children that we saw are. And we hope that we don't have to face a winter in tents, Ken, because I can just imagine—I was standing in the refugee camp, and you could look over the hills of Macedonia and see the mountains of Kosovo, and they still have snow on them. So I know that the snow doesn't leave until July or so, and it's back by September or October. So it will be a great challenge. We're hoping that we don't have to meet that challenge.

But I'm confident that with the continuing support, the broad-based citizen concern that we've seen in our country and around the world, that whatever the needs that these people have, we will be able to address them until the day finally arrives when they're able to go home and resume their lives in peace and security.

So, to all of you who are on the frontlines making that happen in all your various ways, I want to thank you for your hard work. And thank you for being here this afternoon. (Applause.)

END

1:55 P.M. EDT