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Baptists in Balkans appeal for funds, volunteers, prayer

By Bob Allen

TIRANA, Albania (ABP) -- Money, volunteers and prayer are priority needs in efforts to relieve suffering created by war in the Balkans, Baptist sources in the region report.

The Baptist Center in Tirana, Albania, needs \$100,000 to provide food and other necessities for refugees fleeing Kosovo by the hundreds of thousands, according to the center's director, Canadian missionary Jonathan Steeper.

Baptist churches have joined in a coordinated plan to serve the estimated 310,000 refugees who are already in Albania. Private families reportedly have put up about half of them, while Albanian authorities have built, with foreign assistance, 24 refugee camps with space for a total of 31,000 people. Another 10 camps are under construction, with a total capacity of 58,000.

Meanwhile, refugees continued to pour across the Albanian border. Reuters quoted a relief official who said more than 3,000 Kosovar refugees arrived in the Albanian town of Kukes on April 13.

European Baptist Press Service reported that 20,000 Danish Marks the European Baptist Federation spent from emergency funds has already been spent on food and hygiene for refugees.

Baptists and other evangelicals in Albania are working closely in the larger relief effort with the Salvation Army, which has trucks for distribution of materials and field kitchens for persons in refugee camps.

With help from the Southern Baptist Convention's International Mission Board, food boxes are also being prepared for Albanian families who are housing refugees from Kosovo. Many of the host families already live at a subsistence level.

Bekim Beka, a Kosovar who is directing the Tirana Baptist Center's refugee ministry, said receiving money is critical because it is quicker to buy needed goods locally.

The Atlanta-based Cooperative Baptist Fellowship reported it has three couples on the ground near Kosovo with contacts in Albania and Macedonia. Urgent needs include prayer, financial contributions for food, clothing and medical supplies and medical volunteers, primarily doctors, according to Fellowship officials.

The Fellowship immediately made \$10,400 available to its Albania team for relief efforts. Additional designated gifts are also coming in. First Baptist Church in Greenville, S.C., raised more than \$16,000 in a weekend appeal.

Officials said Tony Buesing, a long-term CBF volunteer, is going to Tirana with Fellowship missionary Darrell Smith. Buesing will coordinate volunteers in Albania under Steeper's direction.

Volunteer medical workers, particularly those with skills in dealing with trauma and field settings, are needed, and may be on their way as early as April 25. Volunteers will be expected to pay their own expenses, CBF officials said. Other volunteer opportunities are expected as refugees in Albania are sent on to other countries including Turkey, Germany and the United States.

In addition to money and volunteers, the Fellowship also outlined a protocol for sending good, clean clothing and shoes for refugees. While such donations will take longer to reach the field, they will serve a long-term need, Fellowship officials said.

Baptist World Aid, the relief and development arm of the Baptist World Alliance, said April 13 it is continuing to support relief efforts for those suffering from the conflict in Kosovo.

Local Baptists in Macedonia are caring for refugees in their homes, and the BWA has provided \$10,000 for the purchase of food and medicines. Croatian and Bosnian Baptists are also caring for Kosovar and Serbian refugees, said officials at the McLean, Va.,-based BWA.

Baptist World Aid Director Paul Montacute said he has also been in contact with Baptist leaders in Serbia. Three Baptist relief agencies -- Bread of Life in Belgrade, Tabita in Novi Sad and Love Your Neighbor in Vrnjacka Banka -- all report suffering among their people and limitation of their own activities, he said.

A missile damaged a relief warehouse at the Baptist Church in Nis, Serbia, Montacute said, and an economic embargo against Yugoslavia's government makes it difficult to provide aid from outside the country.

Montacute said response to BWAid's "Balkan Appeal" has been generous but will likely be needed for many months. "It is five years ago this month that the Rwandan genocide occurred, and we are still at work in that situation," he said.

In other developments, the European Baptist Federation's executive committee adopted a statement on the current crisis in the Balkans. It called on member bodies, "whatever our political or ethnic affiliations" to "seek in all situations to express that deeper unity of the body of Christ, which transcends all human organizations."

The statement acknowledged "that any long-term solution in the Balkans will depend on tackling the root causes of ancient conflict" and called on Baptists "to recognize the significant contribution which can be made by the church of Jesus Christ in the process of peace and reconciliation."

The group also voted to cancel an EBF congress that had been scheduled July 20-25 in Poland over concern that a low turnout would result in a significant financial deficit. One factor cited in the decision is that registrations from both Western and Eastern Europe have been affected by hostilities in the Balkans.

Another Baptist leader warned that East-West tensions developing in the Balkan conflict could have "devastating effect" on the Baptist witness in Slavic countries.

Denton Lotz, general secretary of the Baptist World Alliance and a former missionary in Eastern Europe, said recent reports that Serbian Baptists are being attacked because of their ties to the West are reminiscent of accusations under communist regimes that Baptists were an "American religion" or a "foreign element."

"With this type of thinking, even in a time of peace, Baptist witness is very difficult," Lotz said. "Now with the emotions of war, it becomes even more difficult."

EDITOR'S NOTE: Following is the full text of a protocol for donating clothing for refugees released by the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship:

The following "Protocol for Sending Clothing for Refugees" is a means for 'hands on' helping that will be slower to arrive on the field, but will provide a long-term need. Please follow the instructions carefully.

1. Send good, clean clothing and shoes to:
NOV ZIVOT Humanitarno zdruzenie
Richard & Martha Shaw, CBF Representatives
ul. Rokomija 74a, P.O. Box 199
91000 Skopje
R. Macedonia

2. The packaging must not be any longer than 42 inches. The girth and length may not total more than 79 inches. It may not exceed 70 pounds.

3. Use Customs form PS 2976-A, following the instructions on the back of it and attach to the front of the package. The contents must be listed on the form (example: 10 T-shirts for children, 5 pairs of men's pants, etc.). Please check "Gift". Include a reasonable U.S. dollar value (estimated) of the items in the box.

4. Include a statement such as, "This stock is coming for the purpose of humanitarian aid. It will be distributed through a humanitarian aid agency free of charge."

Please include all of the above.

Air mail parcel post takes 5-7 days. Surface mail parcel post takes 4-6 weeks.

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Balkan tensions put hold on missions partnership

By Rob Marus

JEFFERSON CITY, Mo. (ABP) -- Missouri Baptists and their counterparts in the former Soviet republic of Belarus are praying for a swift end to the war in Yugoslavia so they can renew joint ministry efforts. Administrators at the Missouri Baptist Convention announced April 5 that mission trips through the state convention's partnership with the Belarus Union of Evangelical Christians-Baptist are suspended until conditions in the Balkans improve.

Missouri Baptist leaders said they made the decision because of potential danger to missions volunteers in Eastern Europe due to anti-American sentiment stemming from the NATO bombing of Serb military targets.

The decision immediately affected a Woman's Missionary Union trip scheduled May 23-June 2. The Missourians had planned to help Belarussian women conduct the second Belarus Baptist women's conference May 28-29 in Minsk. Eighty-nine Missouri women went to Minsk in 1995 to help with the first such meeting.

Missouri WMU Director Alberta Gilpin said this year's conference will go on as planned but without the presence of the Americans. "We have contacted each of the 70 women who were going to go and, without exception, they were very trusting in our decision," she noted. "Many of them said that family members and friends had expressed concern about them going."

Gilpin said Missouri and Belarussian women already have set a date for a new conference in 2000. "Many of the [Missouri] women I contacted said they will just save their money and go next year."

Gilpin said the Belarussian women she had talked to were very disappointed by the trip's postponement. But they said they understood the reasons behind it and that they trusted in God's timing. "They already are planning for next year," she noted.

MBC staffer Roger Hatfield led the last group of volunteers to minister in Belarus. They returned from a Vacation Bible School-training event March 31.

"There were conditions or situations that would make some Missouri Baptists a little bit apprehensive or anxious," Hatfield related. He said he saw several anti-American and anti-NATO demonstrations while in Europe.

"The Belarussian Baptists were asking questions of us about why we were bombing, which indicated that they were not getting maybe the full story from their news agencies about what was going on."

Hatfield noted one particularly unsettling development for the partnership -- Belarussian President Alexander Lukashenko has threatened to send troops to aid Serbia in the conflict and has indicated he may resurrect old Soviet nuclear-weapons sites in Belarus.

Also, CNN reported April 9 that Yugoslavian President Slobodan Milosevic has told Russian President Boris Yeltsin he would like to join the political-military alliance between Russia and Belarus.

Missouri Baptist partnership-missions coordinator Willard Zeiser, who helped make the decision to postpone the trips, said friends in Belarus have confirmed his decision. He cited an April 9 e-mail message he received from Elena Vogdanova, who has served as tour guide to every Missouri Baptist team to visit Belarus since the partnership began.

"After consideration, I must admit that it [the decision] was right and timely," she said. "The more I listen to the reports from Russia, the more frightened I become.

"I want you and other people in the convention to know that I am thankful to all Missouri Baptists for... their friendship, love and understanding. I do not know what is going to happen, but I am happy that I have such friends. I'll always say that America is a great country and that its people are the friendliest."

Zeiser noted that, though the mission trips have been canceled, the prayer and financial support the state's Baptists provide to Belarus continues uninterrupted.

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Baptist attorney receives Faith and Freedom Award

NEW YORK (ABP) -- A Baptist minister and Samford University administrator is one of two recipients of the first Walter Cronkite Faith and Freedom Award, presented by the religious-left Interfaith Alliance.

Chris Doss, director of the Center for the Study of Law and the Church at Samford's Cumberland School of Law, received the award April 9 at a ceremony in New York City.

The award, established last year and named after the veteran broadcast journalist who joined the Interfaith Alliance two years ago, honors individuals for courageous actions that embody values of tolerance, diversity and cooperation in public dialogue on controversial issues.

Doss was honored for his work as a court-appointed monitor to ensure enforcement of an unpopular ruling by a federal judge limiting religious activities in Alabama's public schools.

Receiving the other Cronkite award was Donna Red Wing, national field director of the Human Rights Campaign, in honor of her work in the religious community countering the Religious Right's opposition to gay rights.

Doss was appointed by U.S. District Judge Ira DeMent to monitor the enforcement of his October 1997 ruling that school prayers and Bible readings in a rural county in northeast Alabama were unconstitutional.

Drawing on his experiences as an ordained minister, attorney and former state legislator, Doss began the task of training educators on the order and monitoring violations. An organized effort resisted the ruling, and Doss was attacked in the media and by mail and telephone. Through extensive speaking at civic meetings and informal gatherings, Doss was credited with easing local tensions and serving as a voice of civility regarding the issue.

"Today we honor two outstanding Americans who challenged the Religious Right's attempts to restrict religious freedom by manipulating and narrowly defining the principles of Christianity," Cronkite said at a press conference announcing the winners.

"We should never lose sight of the fact that faith and freedom are precious liberties that must be vigorously protected and defended in a manner that strengthens -- not undermines -- the integral role of faith in the life of our nation," he continued.

Welton Gaddy, executive director of the Interfaith Alliance, said, "real dangers of religious demagoguery exist in our nation" and expressed hope the new award "will inspire faith-based thoughtfulness and activism that promotes the healing and constructive force of faith and religion in American life."

Joan Brown Campbell, general secretary of the National Council of Churches; former President Gerald Ford, Congressman John Lewis, civil-rights leader Andrew Young, and journalists Bill Moyers and Cokie Roberts joined Gaddy on a selection committee for the award.

Doss, a 1968 graduate of Samford's law school, is a member of Vestavia Hills Baptist Church in Birmingham, Ala. He also holds a B.A. from Howard College, since renamed Samford, a master's from Drexel University and is also a graduate of Eastern Baptist Theological Seminary.

After serving as Cumberland School of Law's librarian from 1964 to 1967, Doss was executive director of the Alabama Democratic executive committee, then served four years in the Alabama legislature and was a Jefferson County commissioner for 12 years. He has directed the Center for the Study of Law and Church since 1987 and is an adjunct professor at Samford's Cumberland Law School. He has practiced law and served as pastor and interim pastor of Baptist churches in Alabama and Pennsylvania.

Founded in 1994, the Interfaith Alliance involves people from more than 50 faith groups and exists to "inject values such as civility and compassion into civic affairs and challenge Religious Right groups who seek to manipulate religion for partisan political purposes," according to a press release.

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-- By Bob Allen

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