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HEADLINE: A race against time

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BODY:

I have just spent two heart-rending days with the refugees of Kosovo.

I went to the refugee camps in Albania and the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia and to the borders of Kosovo to see for myself their suffering; to express the solidarity of the United Nations with the victims of the brutality and "ethnic cleansing"; and to tell them the United Nations is not only helping them in their present plight, but is preparing in every way for their return in safe and secure conditions.

At the Blace border-crossing with Kosovo, I held the hand of a 100-year-old woman, who asked me with tears in her eyes: "How could this be happening to me at this time in my life?" I spoke to a young mother who only three weeks before had given birth to a child while hiding in the mountains. A woman holding a 3-year-old boy told me her last memory of her husband was when he was arrested and taken away. She has not heard from him since.

In the Stenkovac Camp in Macedonia, I listened to an old man whose entire village had been in flight for two months, seeking refuge wherever possible, and finding it only now. In Albania, in the Kukes camp, I visited a young woman in a field hospital who had been shot in the leg as she fled her home with her newborn baby. On the border between Albania and Kosovo, I visited a small family in a tent who, with extraordinary dignity and quiet courage, welcomed me and asked only that they be allowed to return to their homeland. I could only tell them: That is what we want, too. Indeed, that is what the world demands.

And as I was leaving the camp, I was deeply moved by a small expression of the generosity and strength of the Kosovar people. I was approached by an aid worker who handed me a small UNICEF pin, explaining it was a gift from a 9-year old girl, who asked that it be given to their friend from the United Nations.

To all the Kosovar Albanians I met, I had one message: I urged them to be strong, to seek solace in the knowledge that in these camps they could sleep without fear, and to find hope in the fact that the entire world has been moved by their plight.

What I saw in those camps reinforced my profound outrage at what has been deliberately inflicted upon the people of Kosovo. It renewed my conviction we must find a solution as soon as possible - a solution that secures the safe and speedy return of these people to their homes, with their political and human rights respected.

Every day that passes without peace is one more day of expulsions of innocents, one more day of civilian suffering, one more day of hopelessness and misery. We are -all of us in the international community - in a race against time. Every negotiation prolonged, every decision postponed, every move for peace delayed, only adds to the suffering of the Kosovar Albanians.

The international community is united in its pursuit of a peace that allows the full and speedy return of the Kosovar Albanians to their homes in safety and dignity. How that peace is achieved is now the focus of intensive negotiations, involving the large Western governments

and Russia (the Group of Eight), the United Nations and all who seek peace with justice for the people of Kosovo.

Meanwhile, we in the United Nations are reinforcing our aid efforts across-the-board. We are expanding the scope and depth of our relief, we are improving the coordination of our assistance, and we are looking to the future and planning for the political stability and economic reconstruction of Kosovo and the entire region.

We are determined to be prepared, quickly and comprehensively, for the peace, because we know the humanitarian crisis we face is at root a human-rights tragedy. We know we are confronting the humanitarian consequences of crimes against humanity.

The Kosovo crisis is a crucial test for the international community. There, to a degree unequaled in other conflicts around the world, immense efforts and great resources are being applied. With the eyes of the world on us, it is imperative we aid the uprooted and brutalized people of Kosovo now, and return them to their homes swiftly and safely.

This is the challenge that confronts us all. The United Nations is determined to do its part to meet this challenge - above all, so all the Kosovar Albanians, including the 100-year-old woman, whose anguish I will never forget, can live once again, in their own homes, on their own land, in safety.

Kofi A. Annan is secretary-general of the United Nations.(0) 1999, Global Viewpoint. Distributed by the Los Angeles Times Syndicate.

GRAPHIC: Cartoon, "WHERE IS OSCAR SCHINDLER WHEN WE NEED HIM?", By DEERING

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