

by Brigadier-General  
J.R. Michel Maisonneuve



Canadian Forces Photo by: Sgt David Snashall

## THE OSCE KOSOVO VERIFICATION MISSION

**B**efore the NATO bombing campaign of 1999, after months of combat between the Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA) and the forces of the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (Serbia and Montenegro) (FRY), pressure from the international community on President Milosevic finally forced him to sign an agreement on 16 October 1998 with the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE). In this agreement, he agreed, *inter alia*, to adopt a cease-fire, reduce forces to pre-hostilities levels, and ensure the protection of human rights of all peoples of Kosovo.

At the time of the October agreement, ethnic Albanians made up 90 percent of the population of Kosovo. It was nearly ten years since the autonomous status of the province had been revoked. Since then, all civil administration, police, boards of education and state company positions were held by Serbs. Albanians essentially had no voice in any of their own administration. For ten years, the Albanian majority had attempted to use mostly non-violent means to change the situation. This period had yielded little, and elements of the ethnic Albanian population formed their own rebel army known as the Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA) and proceeded to employ more violent means in an attempt to achieve their political goals. It was hoped that their armed struggle would force the Yugoslav leaders at least

to agree to return the province to some sort of autonomous status, or, at best, grant outright independence.

Unwilling to lose Kosovo, President Milosevic and the Yugoslav authorities greatly reinforced the Serb police and armed forces in the province and began to suppress the KLA uprising, creating in the process a humanitarian crisis which was seen on television screens around the world in the summer and fall of 1998. A number of negotiators were brought in by the international community to pressure Milosevic, but finally Ambassador Richard Holbrooke, a man well known to the Yugoslav President from their Dayton Accord days, traveled to Belgrade, and after difficult negotiations an agreement was signed.

The provisions of the 16 October 1998 agreement stipulated that it was to be *verified* by a mission of some 2000 unarmed civilian personnel provided by the nations of the OSCE, known as the Kosovo Verification Mission (KVM).

This article will discuss the mandate, approach and operations of the KVM, its later withdrawal from

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*Brigadier-General Michel Maisonneuve is Director-General Land Staff at National Defence Headquarters. He commanded the OSCE Verifiers deployed at Racak, Rogovo and Randubrava during the incidents described in this article. When the Kosovo Verification Mission was evacuated before the NATO bombing campaign, he commanded the OSCE-KVM Refugee Task Force (Albania) until May 1999.*

Kosovo, and its redirection into Albania at the start of the NATO bombing campaign.

## THE MISSION IN KOSOVO

### Mission Planning and Concept

The OSCE had never before set up such a large and complex mission. The agreement called on the 54 nations of the OSCE to provide help, and early on the British provided a team of planners. The mission truly started with a clean sheet of paper. There was little that existed: there was no prior OSCE experience, there were no personnel, no equipment, no concepts, and little knowledge of the ground. One month after the signature of the agreement, planning and generation of personnel and equipment had progressed to the point where the



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head of the planning unit, who had been based at the seat of the OSCE in Vienna, needed to deploy with the nascent HQ of the KVM to Kosovo. The OSCE asked nations for a replacement for him in Vienna, and Canada took up the challenge of heading up the KVM Support Unit.

The operational concept of the KVM split the province geographically into five Regional Centres (RCs) commanded by a headquarters in Pristina, the capital of Kosovo. The mandate was to verify the 16 October 1998 agreement and report any violations to the OSCE, while trying to make a difference in the lives of the people of Kosovo. The mission was unarmed, 'Verifiers' wore civilian clothing, and patrolled in contracted armoured 4x4 vehicles.

When it arrived, the KVM expected to be strictly a 'verification' mission. That is, there would be much counting of weapons and forces, and reporting of compliance or not to the OSCE. Pure verification did happen on occasion, but the KVM soon found itself performing other tasks. This was not actually mission creep, for there was a need to first establish the necessary conditions to be able to carry on with verification proper.

In Regional Centre 1 (RC1) (and the same could be said for the mission as a whole), the maintenance of a cease-fire was identified as the 'centre of gravity. This was *the* one condition on which all other actions depended; should the cease fire fail, no other task in the mandate could be carried out. The mission found itself reacting to breaches of the cease-fire in order to re-establish it before being able to continue its work. The mission therefore did not have much ability to get into the 'intrusive' verification tasks which had been envisaged in the operational concept.

### The Canadian Contribution

Canada agreed to provide the head of the first regional centre established in Kosovo. RC1 was based in Prizren in south Kosovo, on the border with Albania, through which much of the arms smuggling and infiltration took place. As for the remainder of the mission, Canada agreed to participate with up to 100 Verifiers drawn from serving and retired military personnel as well as civilian professionals from various backgrounds. Most Canadians were based in the Regional Centre in Pec, north west Kosovo, bordering on Albania and Montenegro, but a number filled positions in the mission headquarters in Pristina and in the other RCs. Canadians were employed as Verifiers, staff, and specialists in such areas as human rights and law. Their contribution was, as has come to be expected, greater than their size.

### Practical Verification Operations

In the KVM, a Verifier was intended to be much more than a Military Observer. In accordance with the terms of the agreement, Verifiers exercised complete freedom of access to barracks and security forces locations to verify their strengths, they accompanied both parties and performed independent investigations during incidents, and they carried out many 'human dimension' tasks such as the verification of human rights, the provision of assistance to humanitarian organizations, reconstruction planning, registration for elections, and so on.

In RC1, Verifiers performed their tasks much in the same way that a 'beat-cop' does. They were assigned a geographical area to 'work' in teams of at least two internationals and one interpreter, and they patrolled every small village and track within their sector. In this way, after performing the same patrol for some weeks, they would get to know the villagers and Serb authorities in their area. Verifiers could sense very quickly if there was anything different about the situation, and they were useful in dispelling rumours which were as prevalent in Kosovo as anywhere in the Balkans.

Because of their constant patrolling, members of the KVM got to know what the needs of 'their' villagers

were, and could thus assist humanitarian agencies in directing aid. They verified human rights violations such as beatings and illegal detention, monitored court appearances, and were usually first at the scene of crime or incidents — even before the police. They routinely filled in village surveys that are probably now assisting in reconstruction and voter registration efforts.

### Decentralized Operations

The great majority of villagers gained a sense of security from the presence of the OSCE. In RC1, great emphasis was placed on a permanent presence in the villages through the use of Field Offices. These were decentralized locations where one or two teams of Verifiers lived permanently. Locations of Field Offices were chosen in accordance with the sensitivity of the areas, i.e., where there was the greater chance of inter-party confrontation. For example, the village of Malisevo was once a thriving multi-ethnic community of over 4000 villagers who lived in harmony. The KLA, however, used this village as their home base before the conflicts of the summer of 1998, so Malisevo was completely destroyed by the Serb authorities and emptied of all inhabitants during the fighting. RC1 opened a Field Office there in late January 1999, and by the end of the same week, more than a thousand villagers had re-occupied what was left of their homes and begun the task of rebuilding their lives.

### Relationships

Kosovar Serbs wanted to be seen as reasonable people, and were held to that standard as often as possible. Many felt the “Kosovo problem” should be dealt with by the authorities alone, without getting the international community involved, but most were eager to show their cooperation. At all levels, the leadership met regularly with the KLA commanders, some of whom were ex-Yugoslav Army officers, as well as with the police and Yugoslav commanders, most of whom were also professional in their approach. Relations with the district prefects, the mayors of communes, the village elders, and the political party representatives were good.

### A Tense Environment

Conditions in the mission area remained very tense throughout the KVM’s time in Kosovo. The deep mistrust of the parties for the other side never abated. The mission constantly snuffed out cease-fire violations that began small but which always had the potential to grow into more important incidents. The villagers were used to such incidents, and moved very quickly at the sound of fire (or rumours of impending fire) with what they could carry on their back. But the indiscipline of the parties made ordinary people suffer. There were several cases of one of the parties

advancing into new areas, or areas that had been vacated by the other side. The most frustrating incidents were those that were unexplained or non-attributable; finding dead bodies was the most prevalent. At the end of February 1999, over 70 bodies had been found, usually left by the side of the road with evident signs of beating or execution. Abductions on both sides also continued; sometimes responsibility was acknowledged but most cases were attributed to ‘uncontrolled elements’. Some examples of the incidents are worth recalling.

Combined Yugoslav Army and police forces mounted an operation against the village of Racak in mid-January 1999. Verifiers transported wounded civilians in their OSCE vehicles to the local hospital. The next morning more than 45 dead civilians were found by the KVM, and the Head of Mission declared the Yugoslavs responsible. The mission immediately set up a permanent presence in the village to reassure the population and assist in the investigation.

Two weeks later, an ambush by the authorities on suspected KLA members took place in Rogovo. Twenty-four people were killed (including some thought to be civilians). The mission was again involved in the follow-up investigation and opened up a permanent location to reassure the villagers.

At the end of February 1999, the village of Randubrava was the scene of an action on two successive nights which well illustrates the type of work accomplished by the KVM. The first night, the Serb police allegedly decided to gather information from the village, and were fired upon by the KLA. When the KVM arrived on the scene, a violent, though localized firefight had begun. The police agreed to stop firing and to return to their barracks when the KLA was also convinced to stop. The toll was two civilians dead, one 65 year-old woman wounded. The KLA then reinforced the village with heavy machine guns and defensive works. An ethnic Serb shepherd wandered into the KLA lines late the next day, and the police deployed a reinforced company in armoured personnel carriers to rescue him. This time, the KVM was on the scene as soon as the heavy machine gun engagements began, and by approaching the two opponents from the rear, Verifiers quickly convinced the Serbs that the OSCE would take action to get the abductee back and the Albanians that the KVM would get the police to pull back. Within a few minutes, the firing stopped. The police even agreed to get back into their vehicles and return to their barracks. The release of the Serb from the KLA was secured that very night and he was returned to the authorities.

As this was happening, two more Serbs who were out cutting wood were snatched by the KLA near Orahovac. This incident became very dangerous as armed Serb civilians threatened to take action on their own to try to release the woodcutters. In the end, after several very

tense meetings over twenty-four hours with the authorities, and heavy pressure having been brought to bear on the KLA at all levels, the two Serbs were released, albeit with one dead.

## WITHDRAWAL AND REDIRECTION TO ALBANIA

### Evacuation from Kosovo

Throughout the month of March 1999 there were more and more incidents of non-compliance by the parties throughout the territory of the province. Each side continued to provoke the other, and there were increasing numbers of internally displaced persons. The KVM force-generation process, however, had produced only 1350 of the 2000 Verifiers called for in the agreement, so many areas were without coverage. Cease-fire violations were the norm, and as the chance of an agreement on the final status of Kosovo seemed to be approaching, the ranks of the KLA were swelled by men of all ages anxious to be able to say that they had played a part in the ‘liberation’. This fact actually created problems for the KLA who had no means of training or employing so many raw recruits. The main areas of fighting were north of the principal border crossing into the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia (FYROM) and near the Albanian border. In some areas it was only the presence of the KVM that pre-



vented outright hostilities. In other areas the KVM seemed to be a pawn of the parties, relegated to recording incidents and their perpetrators. In any case, the risk-benefit balance of the KVM was tilting towards the former.

On 20 March 1999, the Chairman-in-Office of the OSCE made the decision to withdraw the KVM for safety reasons, and perhaps as another means of putting pressure on Yugoslav authorities, who were being threatened

with air strikes. Plans had been developed and honed for the eventuality of an evacuation, and the operation went off with little trouble. Serb security forces were remarkably docile in their reaction to the withdrawal.

### A Different Emergency

The KVM regrouped in Ohrid, a languid resort town on a lake by the same name in Macedonia. The OSCE, hoping to avoid needless costs associated with personnel awaiting reinsertion, reduced the KVM from its 1350 Verifiers to a ‘core’ of 250 by 31 March 1999. In the meantime, the forced deportation of the Kosovar Albanian population had begun. Thousands of refugees, mostly women, children and older persons, flowed across the borders into Macedonia, Albania, and Montenegro, carrying what they could on their backs. Many had their documents confiscated or destroyed, and those able to cross aboard decrepit vehicles had licence plates ripped off and trashed. In this chaotic situation the reactions of Albania, Macedonia and Montenegro was vastly different: the Albanians opened their borders and agreed to take however many refugees would cross, the Macedonian government placed a cap on the numbers it could handle, and Montenegro took all the refugees it could with little fanfare.

On 1 April 1999, the OSCE Permanent Council decided to use the remaining resources of the KVM to assist the government of Albania with the humanitarian crisis. A force of about seventy Verifiers, called the OSCE-KVM Refugee Task Force (RTF) (Albania), was constituted and deployed on 2 April 1999 to Tirana.

### The OSCE-KVM Refugee Task Force (Albania)

On arrival in Albania, the KVM found 150,000 refugees and a great number of international organizations and media, all trying to be helpful, but none wanting to be coordinated. The key was to try to find a “niche” role which would allow the RTF to add value without adding to the confusion. Discussions with the government of Albania brought out the overriding needs of coordination of effort and passage of information. The OSCE wanted the RTF to continue the human rights mandate of the KVM by interviewing refugees on their treatment and the context of their forced deportation.

The tasks of the RTF therefore became three-fold: to provide communications and coordination of the humanitarian effort for the government of Albania in each of the twelve prefectures (provinces); to continue monitoring human rights in Kosovo by interviewing refugees coming across into Albania; and, to prepare to coordinate a programme of registration of the refugees so as to replace their destroyed documenta-

tion. To perform these roles, the RTF deployed small teams of two to five Verifiers, in patrols of one or two vehicles with HF communications, to each one of the twelve prefectures.

The approach of the government of Albania was different from that of Macedonia, in that refugees were not held in large camps at the border with Kosovo, but were being transported south into all prefectures where the local governments were charged to administer them. By the middle of May, more than 450,000 refugees were distributed throughout Albania, with each prefecture responsible for at least 20,000. It was a significant undertaking for the poorest country in Europe to look after a refugee population totaling 20 percent of its own population.

### RTF Operations

**T**he KVM RTF was the only international organization covering all of the country; not even the UN High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) had such a deployment. This fact enabled the RTF to provide a clear and comprehensive view of the overall situation in Albania, and to coordinate the hundreds of non-governmental organizations, private volunteer organizations, and other humanitarians operating in the country.

A typical day for the teams in the prefectures would start with a meeting at the prefect's office with all the agencies active in the area, a brief look at the day's priorities and areas of difficulties, followed by visits to the different camps in the prefecture to collect interviews. A report would be faxed daily to the RTF Command Post on activities and situations requiring intervention by national authorities. The RTF personnel in Tirana manned a desk at the Government Crisis Centre and could thus deal with any problem, such as transport, targeting of aid, security, etc. The other two areas where the RTF was very active were the port of Durres and Tirana airport, through which most of the aid was entering. For example, RTF teams in the port became an essential resource for the rapid customs clearance of goods into Albania.

### OBSERVATIONS

**T**he Kosovo Verification Mission was put together in record time. Elements of the headquarters were in Kosovo one month after the mission's authorization on 16 October 1998, and the first personnel were deployed to the Regional Centres on 28 November. Within 90 days the KVM was deployed in all parts of Kosovo, serving effectively in reducing tensions and assisting the local population.

The importance of the 'centre of gravity' in a peace operation (in Kosovo, the cease-fire) cannot be over-

emphasized. The lack of a cease-fire, or constant breaches of it, kept the mission off balance, fostered provocation, and led to internally displaced persons and retaliatory actions. Particularly in Regional Centre 1, efforts were successful in wresting the initiative from the parties and keeping them reacting to KVM's requests, changes in patrolling patterns, initiatives and plans for reduction of tensions. This was akin to employing the principle of war 'offensive action'.

The 'centre of gravity' was maintained in locations where the KVM was able to establish a presence in



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Kosovo. Unfortunately, the mission never reached its planned strength of 2000 Verifiers, so many areas of the province were left unattended.

In Kosovo, unity of action was most apparent once the Racak massacre came to light. The Contact Group and the OSCE pressed for political action, and the Rambouillet conference was called. At the same time, actions of the KVM on the ground succeeded in holding the situation in a 'semi-stable state' to allow the peace process to continue. In other conflicts, action has often been less rapid. In Kosovo, armed conflict took place in the summer of 1998, and by February of the next year, the parties were forced to meet at the negotiating table.

There was a lack of guidance from the Mission headquarters on the approach to be taken in performing tasks. For example, standards were required against which the performance of the parties could be measured; for example, the number of weapon systems in certain areas, human rights standards, court monitoring standards, etc. It was therefore impossible to compare (*ver-*

ify) the performance of the parties against accepted standards. What was required was to translate the agreements and the UN Security Council resolutions regarding Kosovo into practical, usable information for the Verifiers on the ground.

The need for a quick reaction force and a reserve was reinforced, especially with the thin distribution of Mission personnel. As soon as there was any indication of a problem, from any source, the KVM was able to react quickly and flood the area with bright orange OSCE vehicles to calm the local population and get to the bottom of the problem.

The use of mature Verifiers — the average age in the mission area was close to 45 — meant they were able to operate independently, and they had great credibility with both Serbs and Albanians. This type of employment concept would have been impossible with young soldiers.

All the normal problems of a multi-national or UN-type mission were apparent in the KVM. Among the problems were the lack of English-language capability among the Verifiers, inadequate passage of information, difficulty in coordinating actions, differences in cultural work habits, and a tendency to hoard information and centralize functions. The focus of the headquarters staff was on itself instead of on the work being done in field.

An All-Agency Coordination Centre was established in Regional Centre 1. This was a large room with a map



Canadian Forces Photo by: Sgt France Dupuis

showing the most current information, including a mine trace, as well as desks and chairs, computers and printers. The idea was to support the International and Non-Government Organizations by making a room available to them where they could come and exchange information or use the facilities to work. Once a week, a meeting was held with all interested parties for the purpose of passing information. Although IOs/NGOs are renowned for not wanting to be 'coordinated', they felt so welcome that they attended regularly.

Logistics was a constant challenge as all equipment and vehicles had to be acquired or contracted. This was alternate service delivery at its best, and for the most part, worked well. There were limitations, however. The need to accept tenders, the integration of personnel and equipment into a working whole, a lack of flexibility in the timing and speed of contract fulfillment were the major challenges.

In a humanitarian operation such as that in Albania, proper targeting and establishment of a niche role for the force is the most important observation to be made.

## CONCLUSION

As the war raged in the summer of 1998, few could have foreseen a Verification Mission which would deploy and become effective so soon in calming the conflict in Kosovo and allowing the peacemaking process to begin. Once the decision was made to use force, and the KVM was evacuated and its resources reduced, it nonetheless proved to be a flexible force which, because of its knowledge of the province and its credibility with the parties, was useful in contributing to the humanitarian effort in Albania.

In Kosovo, the Mission went from implementing a verification mandate to one of enhanced traditional peacekeeping in order to reestablish and maintain its centre of gravity — the cease-fire. In Albania, it served a useful purpose in providing assistance to the government, and gathered important information on human rights violations perpetrated on the ethnic Albanian population and thereby assisting the UN authorities.

Canada and the Canadian Forces can be proud of their contribution to the KVM. Its relative success will perhaps always be an issue for outside observers. However, from the examples cited in the preceding paragraphs, it can be seen that for all its challenges, both internal and external, the KVM undoubtedly saved lives. It assisted in the return of relatively normal conditions in the region, it reduced tensions where it was present; and most importantly, it gave the local population of all ethnic backgrounds some reason for hope. In the Balkans, hope is not always abundant.

