

May 25, 1999

SCHAKOWSKY RETURNS FROM BIPARTISAN FACT-FINDING TRIP TO THE BALKANS

WASHINGTON, D.C. -- U.S. Representative Jan Schakowsky (D-IL) returned Monday evening from a four-day trip to the Balkans, which included a visit to the Blace border crossing between Kosovo and Macedonia where 14,000 refugees arrived over the weekend.

Schakowsky was one of an eleven-member delegation led by Rep. David Hobson (R-OH), Chairman of the Military Construction subcommittee of the House Appropriations Committee and David Bonior (D-MI), Chief Whip of the House Democrats. They visited two refugee camps near Feir in central Albania, one built by the United States and the other by Turkey, and were briefed by the Air Force in Ramstein, Germany, by General Wesley Clark at NATO headquarters in Aviano, Italy, and by Macedonian leaders.

"I will never forget the haunted eyes of the men, women, and children crossing the border. I heard story after horrible story of brutality and murder, forced evacuation, individual acts of terror, burned villages, separated families, hunger and misery," said Schakowsky. "They were traumatized, some were weeping, and they were carrying all they possessed in little plastic bags."

"What did I conclude about the situation? General Wesley Clark reported that 'We are winning. Milosevic is losing. This is an air campaign in support of diplomacy, not as a prelude to ground troops,'" Schakowsky added.

"While feeling cautiously optimistic, I fear that there is a chance that the current strategies may not resolve the situation before winter sets in. Winter creates enormous problems for the refugees, hundreds of thousands of whom are living in tents, and makes it more difficult to mobilize ground forces. Therefore, I feel we should continue to aggressively pursue diplomatic solutions. At the same time, we should begin amassing troops, a process that Gen. Clark says would take 75 days, in the hopes that we never have to use them but that their presence will help bring Milosevic to the table. Many of these troops will be needed in any case to immediately enforce an agreement when one is reached," said Schakowsky, who voted to require the President to seek authorization from the Congress before deploying ground troops.

"An aspect of Gen. Clark's briefing that particularly disturbed me was the fact that NATO has been unable to isolate Serbia and that 25,000 barrels of oil, enough to fuel their war effort, are still reaching Serbia every day. Much is coming up the Danube, apparently even some from NATO allies. I find it intolerable that it is easier to get consensus on bombing than on a complete economic embargo," said Schakowsky.

OTHER HIGHLIGHTS OF THE TRIP

REFUGEE CAMPS IN ALBANIA

The delegation went to Camp Hope near Feir in central Albania. This camp was built by the Americans to eventually house 20,000 refugees in tents, but currently had 2,500 people. We were greeted and briefed about the camp by reservist Colonel Carol Miller, a constituent of Schakowsky's from Skokie, whose husband is the Chief of Police there. We visited refugees living in tents, and in one, a family told me of being given 15 minutes to leave their village, and witnessing a family hit by a grenade, killing five and injuring six.

At a camp built by the Turks near Feir, we were greeted by hundreds of people shouting NATO, NATO and welcoming us, some of them weeping. There were 4,000 people in a camp with a capacity of 5,000. It was well-organized, but hot and struggling with sanitation and water problems.

BLACE

Blace is on the Macedonian border with Kosovo. Saturday and Sunday, thousands of people crossed over, mostly families being forced from their villages. We arrived on Sunday and all the people had been processed from the day before. About 500 people can stay in tents for a day or two and then are moved out to more permanent settings. A woman with a weathered face and babushka who minutes before crossed over, told me how the police made her grown son lie on the floor while they put a gun to his head and demanded money or they would kill him. The young man stood next to his wife who was holding their two-month-old baby, and he wept, putting his face in his hands. A crying teenage boy in the family told us he was threatened with a knife across his neck. The police had given them 5 minutes to leave and two weeks later they arrived at Blace. With the help of a translator, we talked with other families. One had eaten grass in the mountains; another had been on the run for two months in the hills and wandering from village to village. One man, who had arrived Saturday, showed us the wheelbarrow in which he had pushed his elderly mother a great distance to safety across the border. One tent was filled with women and children who didn't know where their husbands and fathers were. It was chillingly quiet even the children were mostly silent.

MACEDONIAN GOVERNMENT LEADERS

We were briefed by government officials who told us how the economy of their country was being severely strained by the war. They believe that Milosevic is trying to destabilize Macedonia and Albania. They made a plea for more international assistance.

GENERAL CLARK'S BRIEFING

General Clark told us that, as a result of the mistaken bombing of the Chinese embassy,

there was now in place "target process refinement" that required that all targets be "verified."