

Editorial:

White Road for Nova Bila and Silver Bosnia: A Chronology of the Humanitarian Convoy

Humanitarian work has always been an inseparable part of a war, particularly in our times, when technology of information spreads the news on the sufferings of those endangered by war throughout the world. Regardless of the ambiguity of the world's politics, disorganization of the warring sides and general confusion and complexity surrounding the armed conflict in Croatia and Bosnia and Herzegovina (BH), humanitarian work accompanying the conflict received an immense humanitarian attention and help (1). We will describe here a single humanitarian action, a single convoy, believing that it deserved attention for several reasons: (a) it concerned a completely surrounded community, neglected by international humanitarian organizations and abandoned by those who wanted to help but were unable to do so (Croatian Republic of Herzeg-Bosnia); (b) it was the fastest organized and largest nongovernmental humanitarian help organized in Croatia; (c) it involved an interesting combination of the two leading groups, physicians and Franciscan monks; (d) it passed through numerous troubles and perils which revealed the roles and relationships of the warring sides in BH; (e) it was attacked and saved, one man was killed and five wounded; (f) it marked the great turn in the history of Croatian nation because it was the first aid that started from the capital city of Zagreb and reached Central Bosnia; (g) a part of its organizational scheme branched into the office of the Croatian Medical Journal, which both makes us proud and prompts us to report on the event on these pages.

Background

After the outbreak of the armed conflict between Croats and Muslims of BH in April 1993, Croats of Central Bosnia were surrounded by 6 to 10-fold more numerous Muslim forces into several enclaves (2,3). The largest enclaves were Usora (population 18,000),

Žepče (population 35,000), Vareš (population 7,000, occupied in October 1993), Novi Travnik-Nova Bila-Busovača-Vitez (population 70,000) and Kreševo-Kiseljak (population 36,000) (Fig. 1, ref. 2). More than busy with Muslim attacks on Mostar and North Herzegovina, exhausted by the year-long war against Serbian aggression in BH, poorly organized and rejected by the international community, Croatian community of BH, self-proclaimed first as Croatian Community Herzeg-Bosnia and later as Croatian Republic Herzeg-Bosnia, was unable to either break through Muslim lines or to negotiate the supply of food and medicines to the enclaves which formally were under its care and jurisdiction. The Republic of Croatia, itself devastated by the 1991/92 Serbian aggression, accused for certain forms of help to Croats of BH, under constant threat of sanctions, was unable to reach Central Bosnia by any means. International community, from the UN to the last humanitarian organization did not want to hear about the sufferings of Croats in Central Bosnia (2-4). Some day this attitude should be carefully analyzed and the general context of the injustice clarified.

Action White Road for Nova Bila and Silver Bosnia

All Croats were aware of the situation of their compatriots in Central Bosnia but, as explained, all different groups were actually unable to act effectively and/or believed it was the duty and responsibility of others. By the end of October 1993, Dr. Slobodan Lang (5-7) initiated a nongovernmental, independent action aimed to help Croats and all other suffering peoples of Central Bosnia.

The idea was based on already existing improvised hospital situated in the Franciscan church *Holy Ghost* in the small village of Nova Bila, near Novi Travnik. The hospital was formed on Human Rights

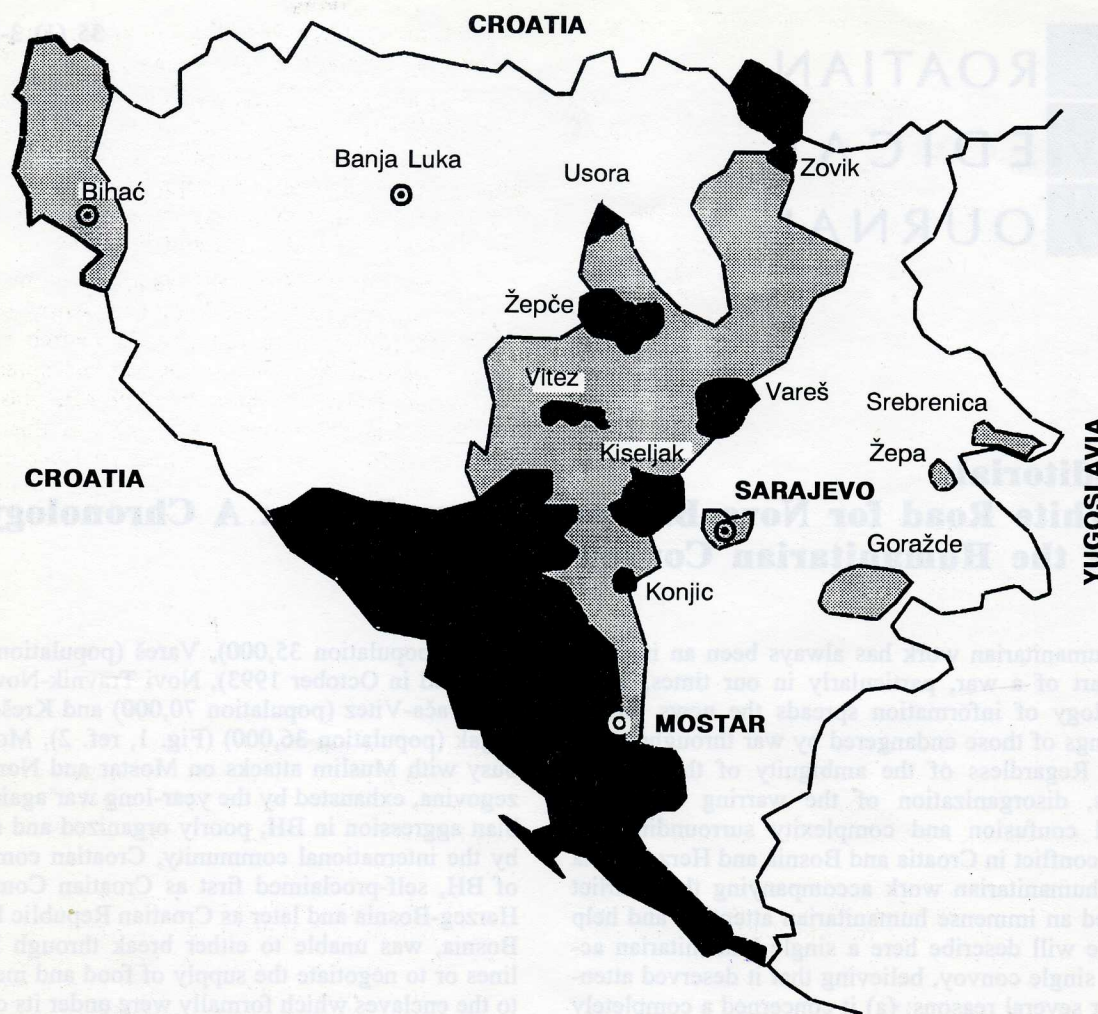


Figure 1. Enclaves of Croat population (black) of Bosnia and Herzegovina surrounded by Muslim forces (grey) after Croatian-Muslim armed conflict of April 1993. White areas are held by Serbs. (January 1994.)

Day 1992, by local physicians and Franciscans, with Dr. Lang's involvement. After six months of Croatian-Muslim fighting and Croatian defeats (Fig. 1), the hospital remained the only humanitarian and medical resort for 70,000 encircled Croats in the area.

Nova Bila

The area is approximately 12 km long and 1.2 to 6 km wide (fig. 2). Out of its 70,000 inhabitants, 12,500 are children, 20% displaced persons from other parts of BH and 40% women. Each point of the enclave can be reached by rifle fire of Muslim fighters on the mountains surrounding the valley of Lašva (from Novi Travnik on the north to Kaonik on the south, Fig. 2). The enclave itself contained two small Muslim-held enclaves, the Old Vitez (a part of the town of Vitez) and the village of Kruščica. The food and medicines were short. There were dozens of wounded children, some wounded and 10 killed by sniping rifle fire. Local authorities issued numerous

appeals to Croats and to international community but in vain. The turning point was when a human rights activist of Herzeg-Bosnia, Mr. Ante Damjanović, managed to get in and out of the enclave and brought the alarming first-hand news to Zagreb. His teacher, Dr. Lang, helped him meet Croatian officials and other important figures on October 29, 1993, and appear live on Croatian TV.

The Action

In a TV show on October 31, 1993, Dr. Lang advised all those who wanted to help to contact Dr. Ana Marušić at the CMJ. The next morning the work on CMJ had to stop because both telephones constantly kept ringing, offering all kinds of aid, from all sides of the world, Croatia and BH. One of the calls (Mr. Juraj Bokunić) offered an office in Zagreb, Ilica 128, and a dozen of people met there the next day. The *Action White Road for Nova Bila and Silver Bosnia* was founded (8). The expression *Silver Bosnia* was chosen

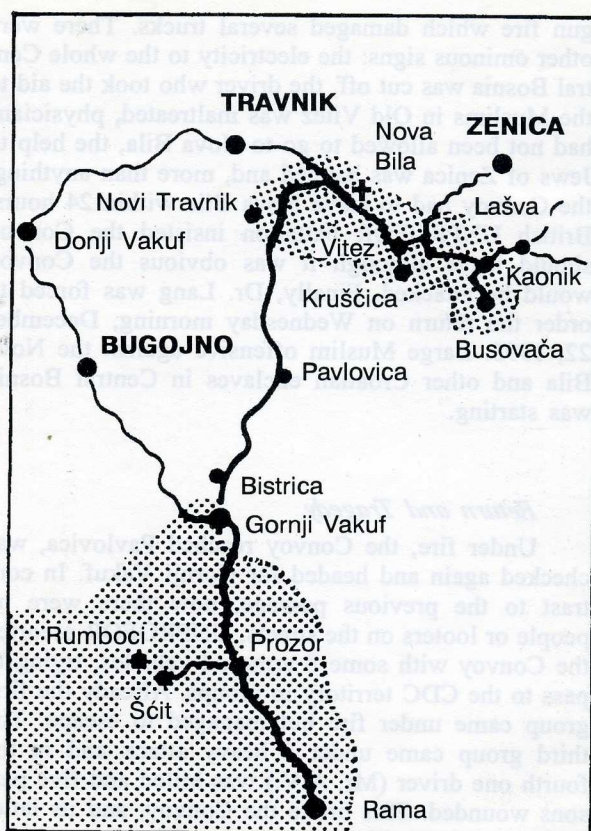


Figure 2. The last part of the route of the convoy organized by the nongovernmental association *White Road for Nova Bila and Silver Bosnia*. From Rama the Convoy went through Prozor, Gornji Vakuf, Pavlovica (searching check-point) and Novi Travnik to Nova Bila. The Convoy started from Zagreb on December 10, and returned to Prozor on December 22, 1993. The frontal attack and casualties took place at its return, in the village of Bistrica. The shaded areas are held by the Croats and the white areas by the Muslims of Bosnia and Herzegovina.

to honour the contribution of Franciscans, because it is their ancient name for Central Bosnia.

Soon, the founding members of the Action brought in their friends and the news spread like thunder. The aid started pouring in, threatening to flood us. Fortunately, many people with different skills joined the Action and we were able to cope with all challenges. Essentially, the Action worked through a Council and its 16 Committees, of which most did a splendid job. It was decided that the Action's convoy will start on the Human Rights Day, December 10, 1993. Owing to great organizational talent and heroic efforts of Mr. Herman Vukušić, the Convoy was ready and started as scheduled.

The Convoy

The journey, all accompanying events and data on the Convoy are not systematized yet, and the details differ from a witness to a witness, depending to his/her position in the Convoy and the fate of that part

of the Convoy. Here we will try to give a cross section picture, a summary of all available data.

The aim of the Convoy was to reach Croats of the Nova Bila enclave with food, medical aid and equipment for the Franciscan hospital. A part of the aid was aimed for (a) hospital in Muslim-held town of Zenica, (b) small Jewish community in Zenica, (c) Muslim (sub)enclaves in Old Vitez and Kruščica.

At its start, the Convoy was approved by the BH government (Mr. H. Silajdžić) and Army (General Rasim Delić). Bosnian Embassy in Zagreb not only fully supported the Convoy but was prompted to organize own convoy in Split, aimed to Muslims in Maglaj. In a friendly atmosphere, a part of this convoy was aimed for Croats in the Nova Bila enclave. It is really unfortunate that these beautiful plans soon turned into a series of tragic events, failing to fulfill most of their goals.

Through Croatia and Free Parts of Herzeg-Bosnia

The Convoy started from Zagreb with 38 5-12 tons trucks, a gasoline truck, two accompanying vehicles and a bus with medical personnel, Franciscans and newsreporters (some 50 persons). The Convoy was officially led by Dr. S. Lang and commanded by Mr. H. Vukušić.

After a small but moving ceremony at Zagreb's West Train Station at noon on December 10, 1993, the Convoy reached Rijeka in the late evening. There it spent the night, accepted four new trucks and in the morning headed for Split. The weather was bad, storm and occasional Serbian fire followed the Convoy across the Maslenica pontoon bridge. In return, the reception in Split was overwhelming. New 40 trucks and additional volunteers doubled the size of the Convoy. On December 12, 1993, it left Split for Tomislavgrad (BH), which it reached safely on the evening of the same day. From there, troubles followed the Convoy until its return from the mission.

Muslim military authorities requested new negotiations, which included Croatian Defense Council (CDC, army of the Croats in Herzeg-Bosnia) and Dr. Lang. Fortunately, Dr. Lang realized that the Muslim side was saving time for Muslim convoy to get prepared in Split. Thus, our Convoy waited for the Muslim one in the Rama Valley, making the final preparations and checks, honored by immense love, attention, care and prayers of the Croats of Rama. The implicit conditioning of our passage by waiting for Muslim convoy is in contrast both to the international rules and to our previous agreements on the unconditional passage of humanitarian convoys. However, that moment was not suitable for moral disquisitions, and the Convoy (a) waited patiently for the Muslim convoy to reach Rama and (b) negotiated (Dr. Lang) incessantly to get the permission and protection to enter the Muslim-held territory which stretched from Gornji Vakuf to Novi Travnik (Fig. 2).

On the Muslim-held Territory

At 6:15 on Saturday, December 18, 1993, 92 vehicles with nearly 1,000 tons of aid crossed the front line towards Muslim-held land. Along the first kilometer of the Muslim territory, before Muslim Military Police took over the protection of the Convoy, some 30 trucks were looted by persons in Muslim Army uniforms. Men would jump on the truck, point the guns and hastily rob the travellers of all movable goods and money. UNPROFOR escort in the front and at the end of the Convoy saw this and did nothing. Afterwards, all until Pavlovica, Muslim MP gave the Convoy a perfect protection.

Pavlovica

The searching check-point was the village of Pavlovica (Fig. 2). Gen. Delić ordered and promised that the search would end until 15:00 of the same day. It did not, but lasted until the night; thus the Convoy had to spend the night in open fields, guarded by Muslim MPs who really protected the Convoy from looters, even by shooting at them and arresting them during the day. During the night, however, the looting continued.

In the meantime, the Muslim convoy slowly reached the front line (due to the technical problems). Muslim media accused Croats for slaughtering the drivers (in Tomislavgrad), looting the convoy (in Prozor), etc., although just the opposite was true: CDC soldiers escorted it without any incidents. The waiting at Pavlovica was used by Dr. Lang to return to Rama and escort the Muslim convoy to Muslim-held town of Bugojno. However, that was the moment waited for by the Muslim side!

Contrary to all agreements, Muslims repeated the search of the Convoy on Sunday morning and - interestingly - already in the first truck found three small boxes of the military material.

We denied any responsibility for this and requested the passage: Muslims, however, posed 7 conditions (9) which, after long negotiations, we had to fulfill. Not counting the two which requested the aid to Muslims of Krušćica and Old Vitez - which we announced at the start of the journey, most of them were unfair and humiliating but, on the third day at Pavlovica, Dr. Lang had to yield. Thirteen persons, mostly physicians who volunteered to help their colleagues in the Franciscan hospital and several newsreporters, were forbidden to enter Nova Bila and returned to Rama in UNPROFOR vehicles.

Nova Bila

After some 50 hours at Pavlovica, around 15:30 on Monday, December 20, 1993, the first vehicles reached Nova Bila. There was not a single person who did not cry, either in the Convoy or among the thousands that awaited it. Unfortunately, at entering Nova Bila, the Convoy came under Muslim heavy machine-

gun fire which damaged several trucks. There were other ominous signs: the electricity to the whole Central Bosnia was cut off, the driver who took the aid to the Muslims in Old Vitez was maltreated, physicians had not been allowed to go to Nova Bila, the help to Jews of Zenica was banned and, more than anything, the Convoy had to leave Nova Bila within 24 hours. British UNPROFOR battalion insisted the Convoy should leave although it was obvious the Convoy would be attacked. Finally, Dr. Lang was forced to order the return on Wednesday morning, December 22, 1993. Large Muslim offensive against the Nova Bila and other Croatian enclaves in Central Bosnia was starting.

Return and Tragedy

Under fire, the Convoy reached Pavlovica, was checked again and headed for Gornji Vakuf. In contrast to the previous passage, now there were no people or looters on the streets. UNPROFOR escorted the Convoy with some 8 armored vehicles, trying to pass to the CDC territory in groups. Already the first group came under fire but managed to escape. The third group came under a heavy attack and in the fourth one driver (Mr. A.V.) was killed and five persons wounded. This broke the Convoy, and its latter half was left at village of Bistrica (Fig. 2), encircled by Muslim forces.

Later, after long and tough negotiations, UNPROFOR transferred the encircled personnel in armored vehicles to Rama, but a number of trucks were left behind.

Discussion

The gains achieved by our Action and Convoy can easily be listed: a) a considerable aid brought to the hospital and people of the Nova Bila enclave, b) the example showing the paths to cooperation and peace with Muslim side, c) unification of Croats throughout the world in helping the Croats of Central Bosnia. Unfortunately, the failures are not less hard or numerous: a) the action was paid with a human life and sufferings, b) the Action challenged the Muslim side to show some of its bad sides which might have precipitated new hatred, c) the end of the Convoy elicited frictions within the Action threatening its very existence.

Regardless of whether it was due to our excellent relations with the government of Herzeg-Bosnia or their genuine courteousness, we were pleased to learn that this government and its military force (the CDC) could respect agreements. This we cannot conclude for the Muslim side, even for the top officials, who actually gave all crucial promises (written documents are in our files) that were broken. Thus, we believe an identical convoy cannot be organized after we learned of the risks awaiting in Central Bosnia. A mixed

Croat-Muslim or very international convoy should be planned if encircled Croats of Central Bosnia are to be reached. UNPROFOR is left in our memory as a factor of doubtful impartiality and undoubted lack of will to do true effort to help all suffering civilians in BH. It appears that Muslim side is in as desperate situation as Croats of Nova Bila and thus may be ready to accept carefully planned peace actions. The members of the Convoy believe that there is a dissociation between Muslim people and soldiers on one and their leaders and commanders on the other side: people are not as hostile as the developments on the ground show. Dr. Lang ascribes the small number of Convoy's casualties to an invisible refusal of ordinary Muslim soldiers to kill unarmed members of the Convoy in Gornji Vakuf. There is no other explanation why an open attack of a regular army did not bring more casualties.

At present, some mourn the dead and care for the wounded, some enjoy the recognitions that awaited the Convoy at its return to Zagreb, some are planning new convoys and others, maybe, new attacks; however, we definitely learned that if all sides had been more concerned to offer more care and love in relations with their own people as well as with actual enemies, the peace would have come much faster, thus sparing thousands of lives and a great deal of suffering on all sides.

In this respect, we have chosen the symbol of peace for the front page of this CMJ issue. Mr. Branko Čulo designed the Croatian Cross of Peace which comprises most celebrated sanctuaries of Our Lady in South Croatia and Bosnia and Herzegovina, but also Nova Bila, the subject of this Editorial, and the town of Vukovar, the victim of the Serbian aggression in 1991. The Cross symbolizes our yearning for peace; by touching Nova Bila it symbolizes our struggle to reach it with the Convoy, and by appealing to Our

Lady it reflects our prayers that Peace comes to our people in 1994 (10).

Ana Marušić

Matko Marušić

Slobodan Lang

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