

Relief operations of Japan NGOs get under way for Serb refugees

By Junji Ono

Daily Yomiuri Staff Writer

OSAKA—Three nongovernmental groups based in Japan have started offering emergency assistance to Serb refugees in former Yugoslavia where an estimated 250,000 people have become homeless in the ongoing conflict.

The three groups—Association of Medical Doctors of Asia (AMDA), the Japan Team of Young Human Power (JHP), and the Rissho Kosei-Kai Buddhist Association (RKK)—belong to the seven organizations comprising the Member Groups of the Japan Emergency NGOs.

According to an advance research team that visited the former Yugoslavia early this month, many Serb refugees have fled to Belgrade from the Krajina region of Croatia with only a few personal belongings loaded onto cars and tractors.

About 200,000 refugees have taken shelter at facilities provided by the Red Cross and other organizations, but the remaining 50,000 have no option but to remain out in the open.

The summer weather is particularly severe on people living in the open. The death toll is rising, especially among young children and the elderly, who are most vulnerable to ailments such as dehydration and sunstroke.

The team reported seeing people wandering around in advanced stages of malnutrition and dazed by the trauma of the war.

Even at refugee centers, there is a severe shortage of food, water, blankets and medical supplies. The situation has been called a "humanitarian disaster" by Western journalists.

According to an official of the U.N. High Commission for Refugees, the mental state of the refugees is worse than at any time since the collapse of former Yugoslavia in 1991.

"In one reported case, a refugee killed his companion after traveling more than four days to reach the border. Then he committed suicide," the official said.

He called for a special project to be set up to deal with mental problems experienced by the refugees.

Another serious problem is the increasing number of orphans and abandoned children. So far, more than 300 children have been confirmed as having been orphaned or abandoned by parents fleeing to Croatia.

Separation from their parents is extremely severe on children who go through the daily terror of war.

The NGO groups have formed a relief operation team consisting of 10 members, including doctors. The team has been working in Belgrade and its vicinity since early this month.

In the operation, \$70,000 worth of relief supplies will be brought in for 18,300 refugees in the target area. Supplies include sanitary goods, insulin for diabetics, and stationery for children.

Sanitary goods will be distributed in early September in packages comprising soap, toothbrushes, toothpaste, shampoo, laundry detergent and toilet paper. Stationery will also be distributed in packages that include toys.

Consultation will be offered for distressed people.

The team will also repair some of the evacuation shelters and help in distributing relief supplies arriving from around the world.

Masayo Takebayashi, project manager of the Japan Emergency NGOs, said that according to the Yugoslav Red Cross team in Nis, about 230 kilometers from Belgrade, 5,540 people have taken refuge in the city at 10 shelters or with local families.

A Red Cross official said it would be possible to accept 1,000 more refugees in



Courtesy of Member Groups of Japan Emergency NGOs

Above: A relief operations team hands out stationery to children.

Right: A doctor examines a child.

the city, but that they are in definite need of food.

Takebayashi said, "Quite a few refugees are in a critical situation both physically and mentally. We need more financial support to help them."

Donations may be sent to postal account No. 1250-2-40709, addressed to AMDA. Write "JEN/former Yugoslavia" on the back of the form.

Cash may be sent by registered mail to AMDA, 310-1 Narazu, Okayama 701-12.

For more information, contact AMDA at (086) 284-7730 by telephone or (086) 284-6758 by fax.

