

Briton rescues five Mostar children: Aid worker braves sniper fire and UN obstruction to cross siege lines and take victims to safety from makeshift hospital

The Independent, 28th August 1993 (Front page)

by Emma Daly

FIVE seriously injured children were rescued from the besieged Muslim sector of Mostar yesterday by Sally Becker, a Briton who has spent the past six weeks in the area as an 'independent' aid worker. Two ambulances - one driven by Ms Becker - ferried the children across the front line to Medjugorje, where UN helicopters were waiting to fly the patients out of Bosnia to Split, on the Croatian coast.

Ms Becker, driving an ambulance lent by a hospital in Croat-held western Mostar, braved sniper fire to cross the front line on Thursday night with the intention of collecting a three-year-old boy with a heart complaint and any other children in need. The boy was dead when she arrived, but she was able to bring five other children, two mothers and the brother of another child, out of the city.

However, the children's next destination remained unclear yesterday, as neither the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) nor the International Red Cross is involved in the operation and there are no hospitals standing by to take the patients.

The UN Protection Force (Unprofor) is trying to find places for the children, but the task is complicated by the fact that no single organisation has assumed responsibility for them. Staff from a Spanish battalion of peace-keepers were to assess the children at Medjugorje, nine miles from Mostar, to see if they were fit to travel. Unprofor was last night awaiting the results of that assessment.

A UNHCR source said the agency would step in if necessary, but said Ms Becker had a responsibility to look after the children. Ms Becker, who has spent several weeks in western Mostar, was given permission by the Croats several days ago to evacuate children from the makeshift hospital in the Muslim sector of the city. She said conditions in the hospital were 'too horrific for words'. Those evacuated include Selma Handzar, nine, who lost her right arm and has serious head and face wounds, and her eight-year-old brother Mirza, who is in danger of losing his leg from shrapnel wounds. The two were hit by a Croatian mortar bomb while playing in their garden a week ago.

'Selma pulled down her sheet to show me her stump,' Ms Becker said. 'I said, 'I'm sorry', and she replied, 'It's nothing.' She was really bright and optimistic and happy. She asked if she was leaving the city, and after that, nothing could stop me.

'But we couldn't risk taking their father, who is also wounded, because I had promised the Croats to take women and children only. Everyone was crying. Then, although he might never see them again, he limped down the street to clear a path so that his family could leave.' Ms Becker was determined to leave by midday, as the Croats had promised a ceasefire until 1pm, but she nearly missed her deadline after being held up for an hour by UN officials who apparently did not know she had permission to leave.

Ms Becker said the Bosnian Croats authorised her mission to highlight conditions in Croatian enclaves surrounded by Muslim forces in central Bosnia: 'I just hope I'm allowed to go there now,' she said, 'because it's just as bad, maybe even worse. There is no hospital, just a makeshift clinic in a monastery in Nova Bila, which has had 1,200 casualties in four months.'

Muslims continued to detain a UN aid convoy in eastern Mostar yesterday, believing the presence of the 19 trucks afforded some protection against Croatian attacks. Damir Greljo, five, and his baby sister Elmira were injured by Croatian shelling and their brother, Elmir, three, killed. Ms Becker plans to return for Damir and Elmira tomorrow or on Monday.

Ms Becker and her colleague Lynne Gillett, who came to Bosnia with a convoy arranged by the Medjugorje Appeal, a British charity, have spent the past few weeks delivering aid packages to western Mostar and its hospital. Before coming to Bosnia, Ms Becker was living in the hills of southern Spain, painting and doing the odd shift as an extra on Eldorado.

Seven British doctors are to be flown to Sarajevo today, the Overseas Development Agency announced. Most of the seven orthopaedic specialists come from Addenbrooke's Hospital in Cambridge.

28th August 1993 (Copyright © The Independent 1994)

[Back to News Archive](#)