

200 Children Are Abandoned In Besieged Bosnian Hospital

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Nobody could be sure when Edin Lisnjic died. The only witnesses, three other toddlers in a stuffy upper room at a hospital for physically and mentally handicapped children here, were in no condition to say.

Edin was 2 1/2. It seemed likely that he had succumbed of dehydration in the intense summer heat only a few hours before United Nations troops arrived here late this afternoon. For 72 hours before that, Edin and more than 200 other children in the hospital had been abandoned, without doctors, nurses or other staff members, and with nobody to turn to but a handful of adult patients with severe mental handicaps of their own.

Unlike 200,000 others whom the Bosnian Government estimates to have died in the war, Edin was not blown apart by heavy artillery, cut down by snipers, tortured or burned alive. He was simply left to fend for himself, an infant in a cot who was so severely handicapped that he had spent most of his life at the hospital.

"It's monstrous," said Brig. Gen. Vere Hayes, Chief of Staff for the United Nations protection force in Bosnia, watching as 30 British, Canadian, Danish and Dutch soldiers hastened to unload food and medical supplies, while others donned paper masks and rubber gloves to begin the work of cleaning up hallways and wards awash with human waste.

The soldiers moved about amid a tableau of naked, excrement-smearred children dashing from room to room, some shrieking, others crying. In the wards, smaller children rocked rhythmically in their cots. Many were sodden with sweat.

Some, terrified, hid beneath their cots. Others, large enough to have found their way to supplies of biscuits and cereal and milk powder in the hospital storeroom, feasted on their contraband. Others simply stared in seeming incomprehension at the men in camouflage uniforms.

Many of the hospital windows had been broken from inside and toys thrown out of upper-story windows, suggesting that there had been fighting among the patients. Some window sills and floors were smeared with blood, as were some of the children.

The Drin Hospital, nestled between lushly forested mountains, was one of the largest of its kind in Yugoslavia. Its patients were drawn from all of the Yugoslav republics. Fojnica (pronounced foy-NEET-sah), the spa town that lies just a mile down the road, has been celebrated for its curative springs since the Middle Ages.

For 15 months, Fojnica's Croatian majority and Muslim minority had prevented ethnic hatred from destroying what most people here agreed was a fine communal life. Gen. Philippe Morillon, then the United Nations military commander in Bosnia, thought Fojnica so exceptional that he came here three weeks ago and declared the town "a haven of peace."

Commanders Agree to Accord

An undertaking to keep Fojnica out of the war was signed by local Croatian and Muslim leaders. Those who drew up the pact included the local commanders of the Croatian nationalist army in Bosnia and the Muslim-led Bosnian Army, which have been fighting brutal battles for control of mixed Croatian and Muslim communities all around this region of central Bosnia since the spring. A stamp of approval was added by the local Roman Catholic priest and by the Muslim imam.

The calm ended a little more than two weeks ago, when the Bosnian Army drove the Croatian forces from Fojnica in bitter street-to-street fighting, and much of the town was set afire.

On Friday, as the town was being overrun, the commander of the retreating Croatian troops ordered all staff members to leave the Drin Hospital and a neighboring hospital for adults with severe handicaps. Within an hour, more than 600 people, most of them with severe mental debilities, were left on their own.

For two days, United Nations troops trying to reach the two hospitals were turned back at Bosnian Army checkpoints on the main road from Kiseljak, the Croatian-held town north of Sarajevo where the United Nations force has its headquarters. On Sunday afternoon, Canadian troops of the United Nations force tried a mountain road that approaches Fojnica through Croatian-held territory to the south, and reached the children's hospital at dusk.

The Canadians reported that five children were in critical condition. But the Croatian nurses accompanying the Canadians said that they felt unsafe, so the

Canadians pulled back, urging that a larger United Nations convoy with medical supplies and food try again today.

A Child With Meningitis

One of the five identified as being in critical condition on Sunday was young Edin. The others on the list survived the night, but a Dutch doctor working with the volunteer group Doctors Without Borders who returned with today's United Nations convoy found several other children who were seriously ill, including one with meningitis.

As the United Nations troops began organizing an evening meal for the patients, it seemed clear that few of the children understood what had happened. But many of the adults did, and applauded happily as the soldiers went about their tasks. Some of the adults took up brooms and mops and joined in the cleanup, shouting out bits of foreign phrases. "Hi, ciao," one woman said. "Danke, danke," said another.

Although the Croatian commanders said that the hospital had been too dangerous to approach during the three days before today's convoy arrived, United Nations troops quickly discovered that armed men, apparently Croats since the hospital lies at least a mile from the Bosnian front lines and only 500 yards from Croatian military posts, had been in the hospital during the 72-hour period.

But their purpose did not appear to have been to help the children. The safe in the director's office had been blasted open with automatic rifle fire and emptied. In one office, a party appeared to have been held. Several bottles of vodka and slivovitz lay on the table, with dirty shot glasses nearby.

Some of the older children said that armed men in camouflage uniforms had been to the hospital on Saturday, but the children said they did not know which army the soldiers belonged to. "I don't know, but they were big," a 10-year-old girl said.

Doctor Explains Order

A Croatian military doctor, Bogomir Barbic, said that he had given the order for the 50 Croatian staff members to leave on Friday because he was concerned that Bosnian troops might overrun the hospital and imprison them. Asked several

times whether he had weighed the risk to the staff against the risk to the children of being left alone, he gave no answer. "I tell you, I thought the Muslims would imprison them," Dr. Barbic said, referring to the employees.

The only shooting in the area during a period of several hours after the United Nations convoy arrived came from a Croatian sniper hidden in thick trees on a mountainside overlooking the hospital. Brigadier Hayes, the British United Nations commander, demanded angrily that the shooting be stopped.

Eventually, the Croatian commander, Banko Stanic, shouted up at the sniper to halt. "Stop shooting, for God's sake," he said. "Do you want to start a war?"