

Sally Becker outflanks UN to fly out Croat casualties; Bosnia

The Times, 23rd February 1994

by Anthony Lloyd (Overseas News)

A BRITISH United Nations plan to evacuate sick and injured Croats from Nova Bila hospital, in the Vitez enclave, deteriorated into an acrimonious farce yesterday after Sally Becker, the controversial British aid entrepreneur known particularly for such work in Mostar, took most of the casualties out to Split the night before in a Croatian military helicopter.

When the UN operation eventually went ahead it managed to evacuate only 13 of the 35 sick and injured and their dependants.

The original plan, first researched by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees more than a month ago, intended to evacuate a total of 88 Muslim and Croat casualties to Sarajevo and Visoko, from where they would be flown to Split, and then on to third countries for treatment. However, UN bureaucracy and the negotiation of safe passage across front lines delayed the operation, against a background of increasing UN paranoia as news of Ms Becker's imminent arrival spread.

"It would be a great shame for Becker to grab the limelight," the UN operations staff order said four days ago, with an eye to their own publicity. "She will receive no aid from the UNHCR or Unprofor (UN Protection Force). She has flagrantly ignored UN guidelines, she will not follow her plan through, and these people may come off worse eventually, once her blaze of publicity has gone," added a British officer. Ms Becker, no stranger to criticism, retorted: "If I don't take them out, these people will never make it on to the UN evacuation lists."

The Croatian Hip helicopter ferries ammunition and military advisers several times a week from Split to the beleaguered HVO, the Croat militia, in Vitez. Ms Becker's use of it as a means of entering the enclave three days ago and then leaving with 43 civilians, among them the most seriously injured, drew vituperative attacks from the UN. "She has broken the deny-flight resolution, and put the evacuees at risk," said an indignant officer.

In reality the Hip's night flights are relatively safe, as its landing strip is in a quarry hidden from view and out of range of the Muslims' few anti-aircraft guns. To the desperate people in the hospital, some of whom had been waiting for evacuation for three months, it doubtless seemed a worthy risk compared to the fitful nature of so many UN operations, however well intended. More contentious will be the problems she may have created for the evacuees in the countries that had agreed to take them, a deal already arranged by the UNHCR, but one that now appears threatened by her independent action. However, self-aggrandisement and mismanagement seem traits applicable to both groups. If the UN operation was so imminent, it came as news to doctors at Nova Bila, who claimed that they had no such warning of the UN's plans until the arrival of Ms Becker.

Sergeant Paul Murray, commander of the UN ambulance convoy, showed an impressive Guardsman-like lack of emotion when he arrived to see a row of empty hospital beds.

Subsequent events, however, were to try him as he attempted to work out how many of his original charges remained.

"One woman is somewhere in Novi Travnik. A sick man has gone off for a walk with his wife; we don't know where he is either. Right now I'm not sure how many there are to take out," he said, turning hopefully to a UNHCR doctor, who shrugged blankly. Eventually 13 people were rounded up, of whom five were dependants. They walked into the row of ambulances through the freezing fog, clutching plastic bags full of clothes and belongings, a lint eye-patch on one man being the only visible indication of injury.

After onlookers helped to push the lead vehicle out of the ice in which it had become mired, the convoy departed. "Now it's down to God and the weather," observed Sergeant Murray, weighing up the weeks of his work that had been pre-empted by bureaucratic sluggishness and the woman from Hove in the helicopter.

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