

## A haven for abused women in Kosovo

**DOMESTIC VIOLENCE**, long treated as a criminal offense in the US, is still seen as a private affair here.

By **DAMASO REYES**  
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GJILAN, KOSOVO – Avoiding eye contact and unsuccessfully fighting back tears, Fatmire describes a home life not uncommon in rural Kosovo.

Her father, an alcoholic, allowed her to attend school for only two years and would forbid her from leaving the house even to meet a male cousin. When his abusiveness escalated, finally culminating in the death of her mother, she went to the only place where she knew she would be safe.

She went to Liria.

Kosovo's only women's shelter, founded in 1999, is symbolic of the sweeping cultural and social changes brought on by the presence of KFOR, the international peacekeeping force that arrived at the end of Kosovo's civil war. But pervasive traditionalist thinking about women's rights and a lack of support from local officials has made it difficult for the Liria Center for the Protection and Rehabilitation of Women – based here in Gjilan, Kosovo – to prosper.

"This is a challenge for them," says Nazife Jonuzi, director of the center, speaking of Koso-

to enter local government; and young girls became an increasing presence in schools. But in the small towns and villages such as Fatmire's, in northeastern Kosovo, "traditional thinking" still holds sway.

"I had family problems because my daddy was a troublemaker in the house," continues Fatmire, who asked that her last name and hometown not be used, for safety reasons. She describes through a translator how her father, coming home drunk, would beat her and her family.

"I had a lot of reasons to leave my house. My dad was an alcoholic, he used to drink a lot, he used to beat me a lot. Not just me but my brother and sister, too," she adds. This pattern of violence lasted for several years before her mother decided to seek shelter at Liria, leaving 17-year-old Fatmire to care for her younger siblings.

Though ending an abusive relationship can be difficult for any woman, it can be particularly hard in Kosovo. A woman who leaves her husband is often ostracized by her community – and more important, by her family – leaving her few options when she leaves the shelter.

Fatmire's father, however, wanted her mother to come home. Together with the local municipality's Center for Social Welfare, he worked to persuade her mother to return home. He would stop drinking, she was promised. He would stop beating her and their children, he swore.

Three weeks later, Fatmire's father killed her mother as she watched. Now he is in prison, her younger brother and sister are in the care of the municipality, and she has come to the only place that her mother found safety.

Funded initially by international nongovernmental organizations, Liria is now supposed to be funded jointly by the Austrian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the local municipality, according to the shelter and KFOR. But while the municipality, which declined requests for comment, agreed to provide an equal share of the funding (it has already provided a building free of charge), it has so far refused to disburse any money to Liria. Austrians are waiting to see what happens before contributing what they promised. Caught in the middle are Liria and its women.

"There is a need here in Kosovo for a place for women to go for help," says Maj. Oran Roberts, a chaplain from Oroville, Calif. He's here with the California National Guard, whose troops make regular donations to Liria out of their own pockets. "I'm not in the position to make demands on the municipality, I'm here only to let them know what I've observed and to encourage them to continue providing support for these women," he says. Besides the basics like fuel oil and money to pay for electricity, Liria's building also needs repairs: broken pipes, bulging walls, and sewage backup in the basement all need attention.

"What we have refrained from doing are things that the municipality should be doing," Maj. Roberts adds. "If you're advocating for local government and providing advice and consultation, you don't jump in and do it for them."



**RESCUED:** Liria, the sole organization in Kosovo offering shelter to abused women such as Fatmire (above), is short of funds. US soldiers stationed nearby make regular cash donations (right).



PHOTOS BY DAMASO REYES

var men. "I don't think they accept change that easily." While the US has treated domestic violence as a criminal offense for more than two decades, in Kosovo it is still considered by many to be a private affair that must remain within the family.

Liria's assistant director, Shahadije Rexhepi, even goes so far as to say that "according to our unwritten laws it's not very tragic for women to be beaten by a husband or brother." Such attitudes threaten not only the lives of Kosovar women, but also the work that is being done to protect them.

"I was looking for a way to help the position of women and give them more rights," Ms. Jonuzi says, explaining why she and several other women founded Liria. "We didn't even know shelters should exist because no one dealt with this issue."

But KFOR's arrival in 1999 brought Western values and standards to Kosovo society. Women, once expected to stay home and raise children, were hired to work on American and European military bases; the Westerners treated them with respect and the local men who worked alongside them were expected to hold their female counterparts in similar esteem; women were encouraged

## WORLD NEWS

## IN BRIEF

**A terrorist bomber killed himself and 32 other people as they gathered for the burial of a noted Shiite in a town 60 miles north of Baghdad Wednesday.**

The wounded numbered more than 40, reports said. The attack was one of several in the deadliest day in Iraq since its Dec. 15 parliamentary election. In all, 53 people died in the incidents, which threatened to overshadow efforts by the largest Shiite, Kurdish, and Sunni political parties to come up with a nominee for prime minister.



REUTERS

**In another embarrassment to Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas,** gunmen of the Al Aqsa Martyrs Brigade commandeered bulldozers and smashed through one wall of the barricade between the Gaza Strip and Egypt. The incident appeared aimed at pressuring Abbas's security forces to release a local leader who'd been arrested on suspicion of involvement in the kidnapping of three Britons last week.

**A deal aimed at easing the tension between Russia and Ukraine over the supply of natural gas was announced Wednesday,** and the latter's president portrayed it as a way to wean his country off the barter system of the Soviet era. "The Ukrainian economy is now completely ready for new market conditions," Viktor Yushchenko said. The five-year deal raises the price Ukraine must pay for each 1,000 cubic feet of gas from \$50 to \$230. But when extra supplies flowing from other former Soviet republics such as Turkmenistan and Kazakhstan are factored in, the import price drops to an average of \$95, officials said. Ukraine had sought a raise to only \$80.

**Police arrested another senior human rights activist in Cambodia,** the third in less than a week in a crackdown against critics of Premier Hun Sen. Colleagues said the arrest was related to a lawsuit filed against the Center for Human Rights, which publicly displayed a banner early last month accusing Hun Sen of selling Cambodian acreage to Vietnam. A government spokesman called the accusation "a serious political incitement" and rejected claims that the crackdown is comparable to that against democracy activists in neighboring Burma (Myanmar).

**Days of relentless rain triggered a predawn mudslide that buried**

a village in central Indonesia with mud and rock, killing an estimated 100 residents. More than 170 others were reported missing. Would-be rescuers searched for survivors, digging through tons of debris with their bare hands as the regional government scrambled to try to address the need for shelter and food on top of thousands of other people left homeless when similar slides destroyed their villages earlier this week. Flooding and landslides are common there during the rainy season, compounded by the illegal harvesting of timber. Above, a village reflects on the loss of her house.

**The remains of three more children were found under a collapsed skating rink in Bad Reichenhall, Germany,** bringing the number of dead to 14. One person remains unaccounted for in the debris, but rescue crews reported finding no signs of life. An estimated 50 people were in the building when its roof fell under the weight of heavy snow Monday.



JAMAL SAID/REUTERS

**Forty days of mourning were declared by the government of Dubai after Emir Sheikh Maktoum bin Rashid al-Maktoum died on a visit to Australia.** Maktoum, who was keenly interested in horse racing and helped to make the Dubai Cup the sport's richest event, had been expected to attend a sale of yearlings in Brisbane later this month. He was succeeded by his brother, Sheikh Mohamad bin Rashid al-Maktoum (above, in a 2004 photo with his wife, Hayia).

Compiled from wire service reports by Robert Kilborn