

Personal  
account  
from  
Karabakh



Should  
we go  
back  
to Bosnia?



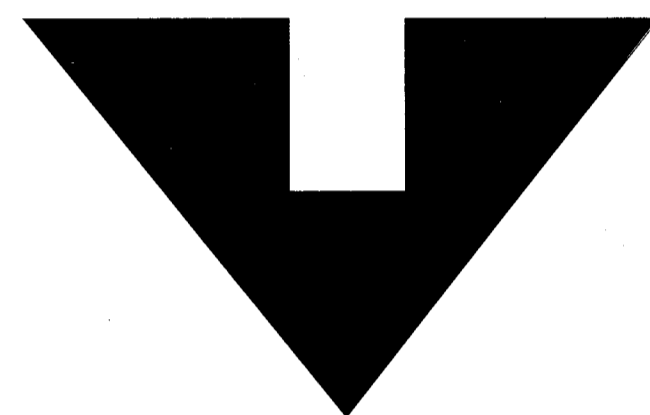
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autumn 1993

merlin (medical emergency relief international)  
Registered Charity No. 1016607  
Quarterly Newsletter  
Editor Cathira Horrobin

# merlin



## news

# Disaster averted in Nagorno Karabakh

by James Henderson

**M**ERLIN has recently completed an emergency vaccination programme in Nagorno Karabakh where the immunity of the local population to common disease was dangerously low after five years of war.

Three waves of inoculations were carried out throughout the region. During the three and a half months of their stay, the MERLIN team vaccinated over 6,000 children protecting a whole generation against common diseases.

"The need was extreme. On an exploratory mission earlier this year we discovered that the nutritional status of the children



Emergency Vaccinations

in Nagorno Karabakh was even worse than that in war-torn Bosnia. Their susceptibility to preventable infectious diseases was very alarming", said Chris Besse,

MERLIN's medical director. "The vaccination programme will immunise all children under five against diphtheria, tetanus, polio, measles and whooping cough, diseases which are normally controlled, but which can kill the malnourished when the public health system breaks down."

MERLIN set up its programme in Nagorno Karabakh in June this year. The team travelled to Erevan, capital of Armenia, with 50 tons of supplies and medical equipment.

There, they established a base run by Niels Scott to maintain the vital link with the London Office.

Liza Coghill, Liz Taylor and Toby Porter then headed for Stepanakert in Nagorno Karabakh itself. The journey took them southeast from Erevan into the mountains through the Lachin corridor, a roadway linking Armenia to Karabakh.

The team brought in four trucks of supplies including the essentials for keeping vaccines cold necessary to maintain their effectiveness. Fridges and ice-making machines were transported as well as generators, fuel to power them and cool boxes to transport the vaccines into the

field. This cold chain infrastructure was set up to be passed on to the local medical system by MERLIN when the team withdrew after completing its vaccination programme.

MERLIN also took in emergency medical stocks, including surgical, anaesthetic, sanitary and therapeutic supplies. These have been distributed to refugee centres and hospitals throughout Nagorno Karabakh.

"Life has not been easy for the Stepanakert team; they have suffered intermittent bombardment and witnessed a great deal of suffering," says Chris Besse "but their courage and professionalism has been rewarded by their success in protecting the children of Karabakh."

(see Letter from the field pg.2)



## Third man raises £3,500

by Miranda Johnston

**T**hree and a half thousand pounds were raised through MERLIN's screening of the film 'The Third Man' at the Royal Geographical Society on July 21st. The funds will go towards expanding MERLIN's ability to respond to those in need.

The evening was not only an opportunity for those present to enjoy a classic film in comfortable surroundings but was also a successful social event. Drinks were served in the bar beforehand and the organisers had a difficult job getting the guests into the screening room on time.

Dr. Christopher Besse presented a slide show explaining MERLIN's work and its aims for the future. This sparked great interest in MERLIN amongst the audience and was the inspiration for a Mail on Sunday article that will be published in November.

During the interval there was a raffle draw. The prizes included a tour of the Brentford sewerage works courtesy of the Thames Water Board, an inside viewing of News at Ten organised by ITN, a year's free subscription to Vogue magazine, a free meal at the Tyrola Hut restaurant, a free meal cooked in the winner's home by the caterers Ronan and Collins, and donations by Nicholas wine merchants on Holland Park avenue.

Thanks are extended to Lumière Films who donated 'The Third Man', to Mars for the free ice-creams handed out during the interval and to everyone else who supported MERLIN to make this event a success.

Due to popular demand MERLIN is organising a second film screening. (see Future Events pg.2) We hope to make this a regular event.

## Merlin: The Beginning



by Dr. Christopher Besse

**I**n December 1989, revolution gripped Romania and the country was plunged into chaos. Ceausescu was on the run. The Securitate were allegedly massacring hundreds of civilians in Timisoara. News reports reaching Britain gave graphic accounts of terrible suffering resulting from shortages of food, medicine and shelter.

I was working at the time as a GP in London. On Christmas Day I decided with Nicholas Mellor to take supplies to Bucharest to see what help we could provide.

We set out the following day in a small van full of anaesthetics, analgesics and antibiotics.

At Dover we bought a map of central Europe and boarded a ferry to Calais on the first leg of our 47 hour trip. We crossed the Danube exhausted and in no fit

state to work. We dropped off our supplies and a week later were back in Britain having done what we could.

The Romanian crisis highlighted for us the inadequacies of British emergency medical aid. In the first days of the conflict when emergency aid was desperately needed we found not a single British organisation working in the field. Rapid deployment of health workers was frowned upon by British development agencies and the highly effective "French Doctors" group of relief workers were unfairly criticised.

It was these "French Doctors" who provided aid when three million Kurds were on the move in northern Iraq in February 1991 fleeing the terror of Saddam Hussein. Their medical teams

quickly set up highly effective, flexible and efficient aid programmes encompassing all areas of public health; epidemiological surveillance of disease, nutrition, immunisation, shelter, water, sanitation and therapeutics. Thousands of lives were saved.

The volunteers were committed, working day and night. They used their expertise as well as working outside their professional fields; building latrines, digging ditches, driving trucks. They turned their hands to whatever task was necessary. Nicholas Mellor, Mark Dalton and I were all there working for with these doctors, nurses and logisticians. We were extremely impressed. It was a privilege to be a part of a dedicated and resourceful group providing such

desperately needed aid.

During the Kurdish crisis, the largest refugee exodus was to Iran where there were very few British relief workers. The British tradition both in the voluntary charity world and in professional humanitarian affairs is well known. Nicholas, Mark and I felt that the time was right to bring that tradition up to date in the medical field. With Mark's experience in the little known world of logistics, Nicholas' expertise in finance and management and my medical background, we made the ideal combination to launch an emergency medical relief charity. Through lessons learnt in the field we believe we can improve the effectiveness and efficiency of medical relief.

On January 1st 1993, MERLIN was created.

## Future missions

MERLIN completed its work in Nagorno Karabakh at the end of September. Now there are a number of other projects in the pipeline. We are investigating and hope to be sending out missions to the following areas within the next few weeks:

**AZERBAIJAN:** Over 250,000 refugees have been displaced following recent military advances out of Nagorno Karabakh. They are living in the open without proper food or shelter. A team is travelling through the area to establish precise needs which are becoming more urgent with the approach of winter.

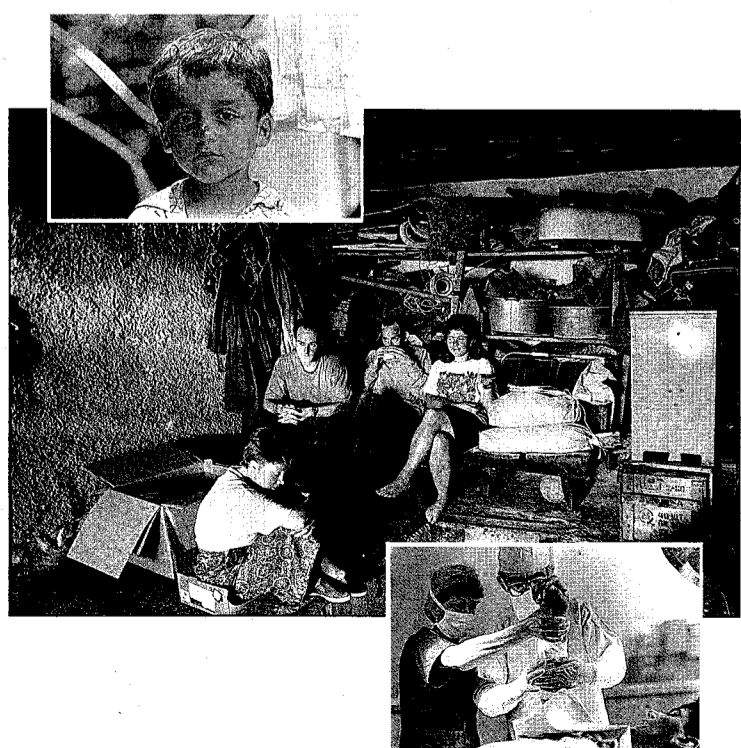
**GEORGIA:** A team flew to Tbilisi on behalf of the Overseas Development Administration in response to an urgent request for aid from the Georgian deputy Prime Minister to the British Government. An emergency supplies distribution programme was immediately carried out. A MERLIN team has remained in the area to report on the medical state of refugees from Georgia's two civil wars, assessing the need for a full mission.

**CENTRAL ASIA:** Medical supplies are badly needed in Afghanistan where fierce fighting is continuing between tribal factions. Outbreaks of disease are threatening the entire region including Afghanistan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan and Pakistan.

**SOUTHERN IRAQ:** A mission is planned through Iran to assess the needs of the Marsh Arabs who have been isolated and whose existence is threatened by the Iraqi regime.

**BURMA:** We are researching the conditions of the tribes gathered near the Thai border with Burma. These are under siege by the Burmese government and although some are escaping across into refugee camps in Thailand, many remain to face illness and injury within their own country.

These are the most immediate destinations but MERLIN also has plans to carry out work in Armenia, Mozambique, the former Yugoslavia and anywhere else they are needed.



Slides showing Merlin's work & aims

Account from Azerbaijan Behind the scenes at Merlin

IF YOU WANT TO CONTRIBUTE TO THE NEXT ISSUE, please contact Cathra Horrobin at MERLIN on 071 229 4560

To all Donors...

Thanks are extended to Glaxo Holdings p.l.c and The Baring Foundation for kindly donating funds towards exploratory missions.

Thank you to Wellcome p.l.c who helped us set up our office in Portland Road by providing filing cabinets and tables:

The Wellcome Foundation Ltd,

Unicorn House PO Box 129, 160 Euston Rd London, NW1 2BP

We also thank Darome Teleconferencing for donating a teleconferencing system:

Darome Teleconferencing, Inc.

443A Brighton Road South Croydon, Surrey CR2 6EU

Lonely Planet Publications have kindly donated a collection of their travel guides to MERLIN. These are a great help in researching and planning missions to more obscure parts of the world.

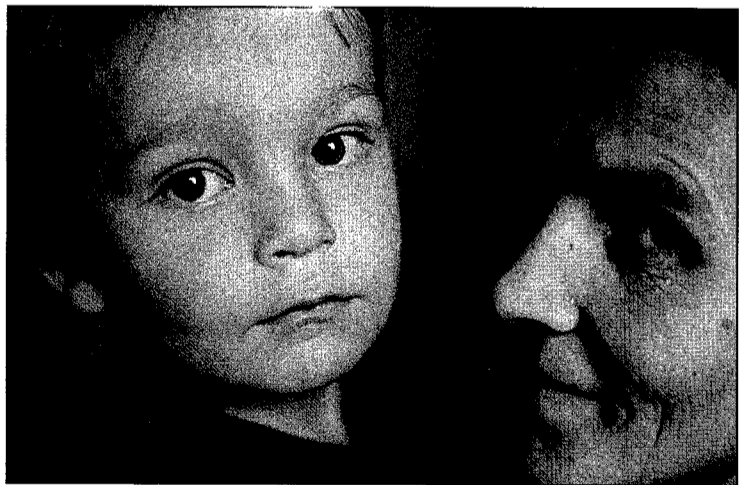
The guides give vital information to low budget travellers about finding their way through the less travelled areas of the world. They give advice on everything from visas, border crossings and health requirements to bus routes, hotels and the best places to change money. They also provide information on local customs and political sensitivities.

Lonely Planet Publications was founded by Maureen and Tony Wheeler in the mid-70s after a trip from London across South East Asia. That trip produced 'South East Asia on a Shoestring' now in its 7th edition and known as the yellow bible.

Today Lonely Planet has over 140 titles covering all long-haul destinations. It has now begun publishing guides on Europe. The latest updates and travellers tips can be found in Lonely Planet's three quarterly newsletter obtained from:

Lonely Planet Publications

Devonshire House 12 Barley Mow Passage Chiswick London, W4 4PH, U.K



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NAME OCCUPATION ADDRESS TELEPHONE

Into Sarajevo...

Merlin was able to ensure the efficient completion of the mission



Merlin tackles Malnutrition in stricken Sarajevo

by Gareth Mason

In early February 1993 MERLIN carried out an emergency operation to supply food rations to Sarajevo. It acted in response to World Health Organisation recommendations highlighting the increasingly desperate plight of the city's population.

The WHO estimated that unless Sarajevo received adequate food supplies up to 50,000 people could die of malnutrition by the end of February. It analysed US, French and British army rations and found British rations to be best both for their nutritional content as well as their lower requirement for water and fuel for cooking. Both of these were in short supply and it was feared that the water carried diseases including dysentery and typhoid.

"The importance of this project is not only its size but the fact that it is driven by a detached study of the precise nutritional needs of the people who are

suffering", said MERLIN Director Dr. Christopher Besse who had worked previously as a UN medical coordinator in the former Yugoslavia.

Some supplies were reaching Sarajevo but these were mainly in the form of carbohydrate-rich



food such as flour and rice. While this fills stomachs it lacks the necessary vitamin supplements to stave off malnutrition. The aim of the mission was to give the population a chance to strengthen physically by boosting

the nutritional value of their food intake. MERLIN mobilised a team of four volunteers to act in conjunction with the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees and the Soros Humanitarian Fund for Bosnia-Herzegovina. The volunteers flew out from Britain to supervise the transportation of 300,000 rations weighing more than 370 tonnes from Vierson and Munster in NW Germany to Zagreb in Croatia.

Twenty-five trucks set off from Germany in three separate convoys and although they each experienced some minor border difficulties, they reached the Croatian capital with few problems.

From Zagreb, the supplies were flown by the UN into Sarajevo where they were handed over to the UN, whose forces were responsible for secondary distribution. At this point MERLIN's work was over.

The army rations were distributed throughout Sarajevo and the operation was considered a success.

MERLIN was able to ensure the efficient completion of the mission by acting with speed and flexibility and by avoiding the bureaucratic complications and cost common to the larger relief agencies.

According to Lionel Rosenblatt, President of Refugees International,

"MERLIN's management of the operation was swift, efficient and responsive to the particular needs of a programme being undertaken under volatile & sensitive circumstances".

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Dr. Lis Taylor is an ex-registrar at the Westminster and Chelsea hospital in London and has now returned to the UK to study Public Health Management at the London School of Tropical Medicine.



Dr. Lis Taylor

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Lisa Coghill worked as a staff nurse at the Accident and Emergency department of St. Georges Hospital in London before taking up her post in Nagorno Karabakh. Apart from her excellent work with vaccinations, Lisa's experience in trauma proved very useful in the hospitals in Karabakh.



Lisa Coghill

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Toby Porter is a fundraiser for the World Memorial Fund and was on loan to MERLIN acting as logistician in Karabakh. He was, however, better known by the local children as the juggler keeping them amused while they waited for their injections!



Toby Porter

merlin

The administration and communications base in Erevan was manned by Niels Scott who is beginning a career in aid work after many years as a consultant and administrator in fine arts and auctioneering.



Niels Scott

forthcoming events

- 1. Iverna Gardens Montessori School has kindly agreed to hold a Schools Jumpathon in November to raise money for MERLIN. The children involved will jump on the spot. We are very keen for other schools to participate. For more information please contact Miranda Johnston or Lizzy Bell at MERLIN.
2. MERLIN is to hold a Christmas Carol Concert at Chelsea Old Church on 6 December. There is an exciting programme of performances planned - this is an event that should not be missed!
3. Barry Norman will be introducing the next MERLIN film evening on 20 January at the Royal Geographical Society when there will be the opportunity to see the old classic Casablanca on the big screen.
4. A champagne reception and piano recital will be held at the Colnaghi fine arts gallery on Old Bond Street on 3 February.

For further information or tickets for any of our Events please contact Miranda Johnston or Lizzie Bell at MERLIN on 071 229 4560.

VOLUNTEERS: MERLIN is always on the look-out for volunteers, particularly on the fundraising side. Anyone who has an idea for a fundraising event or who would be prepared to help in arranging one, please contact Miranda Johnston at MERLIN, 49 Portland Rd, London W11 4LJ, U.K. telephone 071 229 4560.

Return to Bosnia?



by Cathra Horrobin

Towards the end of August, the desperation in Bosnia was highlighted by the plight of Irma, a young, wounded meningitis victim from Sarajevo. After extensive media coverage of her situation Irma was brought to Britain for treatment. There followed a flood of offers from foreign governments of asylum and medical help for wounded and ill refugees. Governments sent officials pouring into Sarajevo to find war victims to bring back for medical treatment at home.

MERLIN director, Dr. Christopher Besse was approached at this time with the idea of involving MERLIN in a mission to central Bosnia. He was asked to suggest ways in which MERLIN could help in the region. Dr. Besse discussed the idea with other members of MERLIN and considered carefully the contribution they could make.



Together they decided that they would not undertake a Bosnian operation at the moment.

"In order to be sure that it is worth mobilising an operation, we have to be convinced that we will be able to make a significant impact on the situation," said Dr. Besse, "the complicated logistical, security and political problems in Bosnia are such that we could not be sure that the supplies we sent out would be distributed or that the medical teams would be able to work. There are supplies and medical experts already out there but their work is made very difficult because of the lack of organisation on the ground."



Supplies entering Bosnia

Dr. Besse is familiar with the situation in Bosnia, both through his own work there and through his network of contacts in the field with whom he is in constant contact. After much research and consideration, the MERLIN team concluded that any funds donated to them for this particular cause could not be used as effectively as if they were contributed towards solving more logistical problems in Bosnia.

"Although additional medical contributions in Bosnia will help to a degree, the impact would be far greater if the same resources were spent on restoring the area's infrastructure in order to enable medical aid to be used effectively," says Besse, "Supplies are no good if they are held up and stolen, surgeons cannot work without electricity. Effectively, one sanitation or electrical engineer could do far more than whole groups of doctors."

Letter from the field

by Toby Porter in Nagorno Karabakh

I have been in Nagorno Karabakh for almost three months now as logistician for the MERLIN team.

When I was first asked to join the mission I wasn't at all sure where Karabakh was. Before I knew it we were curled up in the hold of a Russian Transport plane bound for Erevan with 50 tonnes of equipment and medical supplies. Having worked as a fundraiser in London for the World Memorial Fund, it was a wonderful feeling to be leaving to work in the field even if we were huddled on top of boxes of cargo trying to snatch some sleep in the freezing cold!

We made the journey from Erevan to Stepanakert, capital of Karabakh, a few days later with a convoy of four trucks, travelling at night through the mountains. For the four team members this was our first mission. There was something wonderfully dynamic, hugely infectious about what we were doing.

Setting up a mission is always the busiest time from a logistical point of view. The first month was hectic; putting up radio masts, installing the generators and fridges in the cold store to preserve the vaccines, finding a house to rent, being issued with food rations, finding where to get water, finding local personnel to help implement the programme.

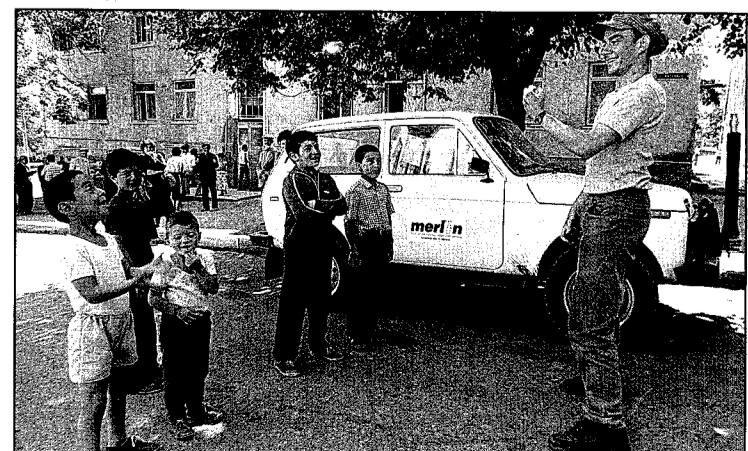
We also had to introduce ourselves to and earn the trust of the people who could tell us about the security situation in Karabakh. It was like a jigsaw. By gleanning different information from several official and personal sources each day, I found I could get an idea of the level of safety in each of the regions we visited to distribute the vaccines.

The programme is almost over now and has gone better than any of us had dared to believe would be possible. When we leave we will pass everything from our Niva jeeps to our fridges to the relevant authorities here. We have supervised the vaccination of thousands of children and have full confidence that the people we have worked with will continue the programme after we have left.

On a personal level I shall never forget the people of Karabakh. For them, our work is

important but just as important is the fact that we are here at all. Of course we would not have come if there was not an urgent humanitarian need and, operating in a war zone, we have all seen some terrible things. I wish, though, that people back at home could also concentrate on the joy that missions like this can bring to those in places like Karabakh. Strangers come up to us wanting to meet us, talk to us, invite us to their houses, even embrace us, simply because we are here. There is an enormous generosity of spirit and hospitality.

Despite the great suffering these people have gone through during five years of war, their first thought is not what they can get out of us, but what they can give. This mission has been a great experience for me both professionally and personally. I shall be sad to leave.



Toby Porter plays with refugees in central Stepanakert