

= Operation Irma =

Operation Irma was the name applied to a series of airlifts of injured civilians from Bosnia and Hercegovina during the Siege of Sarajevo . The airlifts were initiated after the wounding of five @-@ year @-@ old Irma Hadžimuratović attracted international media attention . The programme was reported to have evacuated hundreds of Sarajevans during the second half 1993 , but attracted significant controversy concerning its scale , evacuee selection criteria , and the motivations of the western European governments and press that inspired it .

= = Wounding of Irma Hadžimuratović = =

= = = Siege of Sarajevo = = =

The Bosnian War erupted in March 1992 , following Bosnia and Hercegovina 's declaration of independence from the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia . In April 1992 , Bosnian Serb forces , representing the Republika Srpska and the Yugoslav People 's Army , took up positions in the areas surrounding the Bosnian capital Sarajevo and initiated a siege that was to last for four years . The siege was characterized by sniper fire and shelling directed at the city 's buildings and infrastructure and at civilian residents of the city . Reports showed that between the beginning of the siege and November 1992 , an average of eight persons were killed and 44 wounded in Sarajevo per day .

= = = July 1993 marketplace mortar = = =

On 30 July 1993 , a mortar shell fired by Bosnian Serb troops hit a Sarajevo neighbourhood , injuring five @-@ year @-@ old Irma Hadžimuratović and killing several others , including her mother . Sarajevo 's overstretched Koševski hospital was unable to provide adequate treatment for the injuries Irma received to her spine , head and abdomen . She developed bacterial meningitis as a result . Edo Jaganjac , the surgeon treating Hadžimuratović , tried unsuccessfully to have her evacuated on a UN relief flight . He then resorted to distributing her photograph among foreign journalists in Sarajevo . Several picked up Irma 's story , giving it widespread coverage in the international ( and especially the British ) press . On the evening of 8 August , BBC news led with coverage of Irma 's injuries . On 9 August , British Prime Minister John Major personally intervened , dispatching an RAF Hercules to airlift Irma to London 's Great Ormond Street Hospital .

= = = Commencement of " Operation Irma " = = =

In the following days and months dozens more Bosnians were evacuated under a program the UK media dubbed " Operation Irma " . During the week beginning on 9 August , 41 people were taken out of Sarajevo . It was reported later that hundreds were eventually evacuated under the programme . Other countries , including Sweden and Ireland , organized further airlifts , and the Czech Republic , Finland , France , Italy , Norway , and Poland also offered hospital beds .

= = Reaction and criticism = =

Though Operation Irma was widely publicized , and was reported in September 1993 to have raised £ 1 million in donations to evacuate the wounded from Sarajevo , it attracted a number of criticisms . These addressed the operation 's limited scale , the motives of the British press and foreign governments in launching the airlifts , the devotion of resources to evacuation instead of supplying material support to local medical services , and the broader issue of the United Kingdom 's response to the war in Bosnia .

= = = Criticisms over scale = = =

Some critics focused on the small numbers of persons evacuated via the operation . During August 1993 the violence in Bosnia killed on average three children each day , and thousands of others were injured or made homeless . Between the beginning of the siege on April 5 , 1992 and the first airlifts under Operation Irma the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees ( UNHCR ) had approved only 200 of Sarajevo 's 50 @,@ 000 critically wounded patients for medical evacuation . The British press storm had prompted offers of 1250 hospital beds in 17 countries by August 15 ; though a vast increase on prior offers of help , the total was dwarfed by the estimated 39 @,@ 000 children requiring hospital treatment throughout Bosnia .

= = = The " supermarket " argument = = =

As well as the scale of the response , critics questioned the criteria against which patients were selected for evacuation . At first the UK was challenged over its decision to include only children in the transports while tens of thousands of adults remained wounded in the city . Sylvana Foa , spokesperson for the UNHCR , commented that Sarajevo should not be regarded as a " supermarket " of photogenic potential refugees , asking " Does this mean Britain only wants to help children ? Maybe it only wants children under six , or blond children , or blue @-@ eyed children ? " Patrick Peillod , head of the United Nations medical evacuation committee , said that the UK had treated Bosnian children " like animals in a zoo " and was trying to pick and choose evacuees to suit a public relations agenda . When the government revised its approach and included adults on flights out of the city , claims were made that wounded combatants had been among those taken to the UK , Sweden , and Italy , and that patients had paid bribes to be included in the transports .

UK Foreign Minister Douglas Hurd , on 9 August , countered that though the operation would evacuate relatively few of the city 's wounded , it was still a benefit : " Because you can 't help everybody , it doesn 't mean you shouldn 't help somebody . " Sylvana Foa also later acknowledged that , after months of Western European indifference toward the war in the former Yugoslavia , the new public sympathy inspired by Irma 's case was " like day following night . "

= = = Criticisms of the British government and press = = =

Beyond these questions of scale and selection , the motives of both the British press and the government in publicizing Hadzimuratovic 's case and then in launching Operation Irma were challenged . Some critics disparaged as hypocritical the sudden intensity of coverage devoted to a single victim of what was already a protracted siege . In December 1993 another Sarajevo evacuation program , ' Operation Angel , ' received minimal press coverage in the UK , and the Financial Times suggested that such human interest stories captured the popular imagination only during the British press 's summer ' silly season ' when Parliament was in recess . Susan Douglas , in the October 1993 edition of American magazine The Progressive , said British papers had indulged in " a ghoulish competition to scoop each other over Irma 's condition and to use her evacuation to salve British guilt about standing apart from the carnage in Bosnia . "

The British government was widely depicted as having launched Operation Irma in direct response to the level of press interest . Rescuers themselves joked that " Operation IRMA " was an acronym for " Instant Response to Media Attention . " A Council of Europe publication later noted that European governments had been criticized for regarding the exercise as having " more to do with a political and media operation than with humanitarian relief . " The mission also received some criticism in the domestic press : Mark Lawson in The Independent called prime minister Major 's efforts with the mission a " failure ... to silence the hostile snipers " based on a misunderstanding of popular indecision about Bosnia and on a failure to manage domestic press skepticism .

Meanwhile , within the former Yugoslavia , Operation Irma was regarded as evidence that the British government had taken sides in the conflict , favouring Bosnian Muslims over Croats or Serbs .

= = = Evacuation or local treatment ? = = =

Some UN aid workers immediately criticized the operation , arguing that very sick children were poorly served by programmes that obliged them to travel hundreds of miles . They argued , too , that with costs of around £ 100 @, @ 000 per evacuated child the programme was devouring funds that could have been used to improve local facilities and treatment . The head of Kosevo Hospital 's plastic surgery department said " It would be much better if you sent the tools to do our jobs properly than for you to make a big show of a few token evacuations . " Countering this , A.D. Redmond of the Overseas Development Administration ( the predecessor to the Department for International Development ) wrote in November 1993 to the British Medical Journal :

The Overseas Development Administration has been foremost in supplying medical and humanitarian aid to the people of Bosnia throughout the conflict ... In some circumstances medical teams are needed , requested , and supplied , but in others medical supplies alone are the most appropriate form of aid . I have also , however , received personal pleas from doctors whom I know well to evacuate patients who cannot be treated in Sarajevo ... No solution will suffice . We are all trying to help .

= = Aftermath = =

The press coverage surrounding the evacuation was later cited as an example of " disaster pornography " , in academic analyses concerned with the portrayal of child victims of violence and disaster in ways that reaffirm those victims ' remoteness from and subjectivity to western ( here , Northwestern European ) agency . In a similar vein , Dominic Strinati has presented the press interest in Operation Irma as evidence of a popular appetite for news stories that resemble the structure and tone of fictional narratives on war : " War films work most effectively ... by stripping back the too easily confusing contextual details of a conflict and focusing instead on the ' existential ' problem of the protagonist 's experience ? the problem of being human in dehumanising circumstances ... News reporting ? in this case from the Balkans ? then has to compete even at the level of basic comprehension with this already established way of understanding things ... It may not be surprising , therefore , that one of the most memorable news ' stories ' to come out of Bosnia was that of Irma , a rescued child . " The operation has also been portrayed as representative of a trend whereby public reaction to media coverage of disasters leads and shapes official state response , even precipitating the creation of policy where none has existed before . Erica Burman , developing this theme , has argued that Irma Hadžimuratović became an " emotional focus " for a British public dismayed by its government 's ambiguous and cautious attitude to the conflict in Bosnia :

The widespread anxieties and consternation over government inactivity throughout the crisis could be deflected and resolved by rescuing a handful of children . In terms of recovering a sense of agency ( in a conflict characterised by protestations of powerlessness by political and military authorities alike ) , the desire to do ( and be seen to do ) something was expressed and assuaged by transporting and incorporating some of the need and distress into the UK where it could be tended to and made better .

A textbook on public relations cites the episode as an example of a " bargaining game " in which various players ? the UNHCR , British government , and press ? all sought to achieve individual advantage .

Despite initial improvement , Irma Hadžimuratović was paralyzed from the neck down and required a ventilator to breathe . She died of septicaemia in Great Ormond Street on 1 April 1995 , aged seven , following twenty months in intensive care . The coroner at her inquest called her " a victim of war " .