responsible for identifying refugees to be evacuated and for determining their destination and "will make every attempt to ensure that families are not further separated by the evacuation." While the statement of the ECRE/ICVA Reference Group on Former Yugoslavia expressed support for other countries providing refuge to Kosovar refugees, it emphasized that participation must be voluntary and dependent on informed consent. With options such as the use of extraterritorial military bases and disused prisons being considered, it is vital that refugees are informed and clearly understand where they are being sent and all the implications of this.

Mrs. Ogata expressed gratitude for NATO's offer to provide support in a few, literally vital areas, which given the size and speed of the emergency are beyond the capacity of humanitarian agencies to sustain: the airlift to Tirana and Skopje; the handling and storage operations at the ports and airports receiving relief goods; and the setting up of refugee transit centers and camps, as bilaterally requested by Albania and the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia. But Mrs. Ogata stressed that the humanitarian operation must preserve its civilian character -- a point emphasized as well by many governments. The statement of the International Council of Voluntary Agencies (ICVA) urged that NATO's involvement in the humanitarian effort not go beyond logistical support tasks. The ICVA statement also noted the need for UNHCR to play a more active coordinating role with NGOs and expressed concern at an alarming lack of experienced UNHCR staff capable of coordinating an effective operation under extremely difficult circumstances.

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UN High Commissioner for Refugees Sadako Ogata urged the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia Friday to bring an immediate halt to the wholesale expulsion of Kosovo Albanians.

At least 230,000 Kosovo Albanians have been driven from the province since 24 March, in Europe's largest refugee exodus since the war in Bosnia.

Thursday saw the largest daily influx when up to 40,000 people arrived by train, car or on foot in the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia. Most of them came from the Kosovo capital of Pristina. They told UNHCR staff that they had been forced at gunpoint to leave their homes. Many were stripped of their identity documents and herded onto overcrowded trains.

Refugees arriving on foot at the Albanian border told similar stories of having been rounded up in Pristina and forced onto buses. They were then transported to a point a few kilometers away from the Albanian border post at the Morini pass near Kukes, and made to walk the rest of the way.

"The widespread abuse of human rights by the Yugoslav security forces must cease, and cease now," Ogata said. "Mass expulsions and the destruction of identity documents are blatant violations of international law and are morally repugnant. The refugees are suffering dramatically and the scale of the expulsion is placing enormous strain on other countries in the region and risks to have a destabilising effect."
Mrs Ogata called for massive international support to meet the growing needs of the refugees. "The relief operation is on the verge of being overwhelmed," she said. "Our capacity to respond simply cannot keep pace with the scale of the expulsions and forced population displacements."

Over the past ten days, around 120,000 Kosovo refugees have arrived in Albania, 70,000 in Macedonia, 30,000 in Montenegro and 7,500 in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

The High Commissioner warned that the region's problems cannot be solved by a relief operation, however large and efficient. "An immediate halt to the human rights violations taking place in Kosovo is needed," she said, "and a political settlement must be found which will allow the refugees to return safely to their homes in the very near future."

The widespread abuse of human rights by the Serbian authorities and the widespread violations of international law raise serious concerns about the safety and well-being of the refugees. The High Commissioner has called for an immediate end to the violence and for the protection of refugees' rights. She has also called for international assistance to help meet the growing needs of the refugees.