



The Dallas Morning News: Natalia Caudill

Audiologist Linda Daniel amuses speech student Besa Shala, 2, and mom Hyre Shala (center) with a

jack-in-the-box. Besa, who is deaf, was brought from Kosovo so she could receive ear surgery.

# UNCERTAIN REFUGE

*Kosovo refugees struggle with health-care problems in Dallas*

By Todd Bensman

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As the troubled Serbian province of Kosovo braces for perhaps its heaviest round of warfare yet, three Kosovo families who escaped face struggles of their own in Dallas.

A little Kosovo girl can't get the ear surgery she needs. A sick boy struggles

to survive at an area hospital. Parents aren't allowed to work while they await medical treatment for their children and wonder whether they'll all be sent back to the squalid refugee camps from which they were rescued.

One of the combatants, Besa Shala, is a pint-sized 2-year-old girl with big brown eyes and a moptop of brown hair. Her family was brought to Dallas in

November on a 6-month medical visa because she is deaf and was promised treatment.

But uncertainty over the Shala family's legal right to stay in Dallas past May has indefinitely delayed the elaborate medical procedure that would grant Besa hearing — a cochlear

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Hyre Shala (left) praises daughter Besa, 2, during a speech lesson with Linda

Daniel, an audiologist. Ms. Daniel is preparing Besa for a cochlear implant.

## Kosovo refugees face health-care woes in U.S.

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implant.

Although local Albanian Kosovo immigrants and the Dallas Hearing Foundation have raised the \$35,000 of the \$50,000 needed for the surgery, Besa's doctor says the gift would better serve another needy child if the family can't stay for five years of necessary monitoring and training.

"You're talking about a several-year process of turning them into a functioning, speaking, hearing child in the hearing world," said Dr. Bob Peters, a Medical City Hospital ear specialist and Dallas Hearing Foundation president who has taken Besa's case pro bono. "This is not a case of fixing it, you're fine, now go home."

The Shala family's tenuous circumstances may not compare to the bombings and ordeals of escape they suffered in Kosovo. Since early last year, the Serbian government has used force to put down an armed insurrection among ethnic Albanians who want independence in the southern Serbian province. Hundreds of thousands have been forced to flee, many like the Shala family, into impoverished Albania.

Besa's father, Hamez Shala, worries the family will be forced to return without the device.

"Without the operation she won't hear or speak, and I don't know where my family will go," said Mr. Shala, whose village was among hundreds bombed out of existence last summer. "In Albania, the situation is very terrible. There, I am a refugee, not a citizen."

The Shala family was one of four found in Albania by the British children's rescue group Operation Angel and sent to the Dallas area for medical treatment. One family went to Fort Worth. Operation Angel promised to follow up with legal help and funds but disbanded amid controversy shortly after delivering the Kosovo residents in November. The group's leader, Sally Becker, was accused of endangering the lives of the children she was saving and those of her volunteers. She has denied the allegations.

Besa's plight and that of another 2-year-old Kosovo boy with Down syndrome, Flamur Lokaj, who remains at Medical City and will need years of treatment, has some local volunteers and aid agencies scrambling for a solution.

The most obvious one, they say, is for the families to

apply to the federal government for political asylum, a status that would allow them to stay and work. With only medical visas, none of the children's parents are lawfully allowed to work or drive vehicles. They are entirely dependent on charity.

Because of his chronic medical problems, Flamur "will die in a matter of months if he goes back to a war-torn area," Dr. Peters said. "We keep children like him alive in the U.S. indefinitely."

But because few Kosovo residents who have fled the recent fighting have applied for political asylum, it is uncertain whether their applications would be granted, federal officials say. Immigration and Naturalization Service officials in Washington said no Kosovo residents applied for political asylum in 1998 and that figures for 1999 were not yet available.

"We don't necessarily have a blanket rule one way or another on how we treat people," said Richard Rhodie, an asylum officer in the Houston office. "We look at everybody on a case-by-case basis. If the merits of the case warrant it, they may remain."

Even so, the Kosovo residents in Dallas complain of having had a tough time finding an attorney who will take their cases pro bono.

Proyecto Adelante, an agency that helps refugees apply for asylum, last week took on the Dallas cases. Paul Glasser-Kerr, the agency's executive director, said he believes that "given the conditions in the country, they have a strong chance" of winning asylum. But the additional burden will stretch the organization's resources because lawyers willing to take on such time-consuming cases are in short supply, he said. More are needed.

On Thursday, Besa was clearly oblivious to all these considerations as she worked with audiologist Linda Daniel in the Shala family's temporary North Dallas apartment. Ms. Daniel, who runs a private practice, works with Besa twice a week to prepare her for the cochlear implant operation she hopes will one day happen.

Besa squealed and tried to form words in response to Ms. Daniel's prompting with a Mr. Potato Head toy.

"She's extremely bright, probably one of the brightest children I've ever worked with," Ms. Daniel said. "With surgery, she'll be who she's meant to be."