The World Council of Churches’ Ecumenical Women’s Solidarity Fund (WCC EWSF) is a project fund used by women for women in the countries of former Yugoslavia. It seeks to restore hope, promote reconciliation and human dignity, and enable people, regardless of their ethnicity, religion or origin, to rebuild their lives and communities affected by the devastating wars and their consequences in this region. In 2003, the WCC EWSF is celebrating its 10th anniversary in the service of victims of war.

A decade of conflict

Former Yugoslavia has been profoundly affected by a series of conflicts during the last decade. From 1991-1995 the region was devastated in a war, which began in Slovenia and Croatia as they sought secession from Yugoslavia, and then rapidly spread to the neighbouring Republic of Bosnia-Herzegovina. As well as severe damage to homes, the region’s infrastructure was destroyed and much of its population was exiled. In 1999 a new conflict ignited in the province of Kosovo, followed by international military intervention, and later erupting in the Republic of Macedonia. In all, over 200,000 people were killed, and a million were displaced, in the worst fighting in Europe since World War II.
what is the role of the world council of churches?
Throughout the conflicts in former Yugoslavia, the WCC, working with its member churches and in collaboration with the Conference of European Churches, sought to find adequate ways of responding to the unfolding tragedy. The efforts of the WCC focused on three areas. Firstly, the WCC, after 1996 through its specialized structure ACT-Action by Churches Together, assisted churches, ecumenical organizations and agencies to carry out humanitarian relief to the populations most in need. Secondly, the WCC sought to maintain close contact with churches in the region, keeping them within the broader ecumenical fellowship, and to find ways of strengthening their advocacy for a peaceful resolution of the conflict. Thirdly, the WCC promoted a series of inter-religious encounters and dialogues in an attempt to promote tolerance and prepare the ground for reconciliation. Following the Kosovo crisis in 1999, the WCC launched its South-East Europe Ecumenical Partnership with the aim of strengthening cooperation, peace and reconciliation in the region.

what is the role of the religious communities?
The role of churches and religious communities during the conflicts was diverse and complex. Historically, religious communities became very identified with particular national communities in the Balkans, and differences of faith became a central factor of identity. Under Ottoman domination, the Muslim minority enjoyed significant privileges. Following independence, the various states which would later form Yugoslavia gave advantages to their traditional churches. During the communist period, all churches and religious communities suffered degrees of marginalization and, at times, persecution. In the most recent conflicts, religious affiliation and symbolism was instrumentalized by all parties. Churches and mosques were deliberately destroyed. Nevertheless, Christians on all sides were also involved in peace initiatives, bringing relief to those in most need, and planting the seeds of hope. The WCC believes that churches and religious communities have a unique potential for the healing of societies and the building a lasting peace in the region.

crimes against women and against humanity
In the midst of the atrocities and ‘ethnic cleansing’ carried out by all sides in the fighting, WCC gave particular attention to the most vulnerable and innocent groups in the conflict. In the harsh winter of 1992, the World Council of Churches decided to send an ecumenical team to Croatia, Bosnia-Herzegovina and Serbia to investigate reports about the abuse of women in the conflict. On their return, they published a report on ‘The Rape of Women in War’. The report exposed the organized and systematic abuse and rape of women by all sides in the wars. Later, the European Community’s (EC) report of 3 February 1993, based on two missions to the former Yugoslavia, found estimates ranging from 10,000 to 60,000 victims of rape, from all sides of the conflict, although the majority were Muslim women and children. The EC report concluded that

“We exhort our member churches in former Yugoslavia...to resist every attempt to use religious sentiment in the service of nationalism...we assure them of our continuing efforts to bring succour to the suffering and an end to the war”
WCC Central Committee 1995

A woman prays for her missing husband, Serbia

Displaced women unable to return to their homes, Bosnia

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there were over 20,000 victims, although some
dispute these figures. Regardless of the precise
number, the use of systematic rape in war left a
horror and indelible scar on many women and their
families, from all communities. Women victims of this
horror who managed to
survive felt afraid, confused,
isolated and in pain. Acting
on the importance of the
ecuménical team’s findings,
the WCC urged the broader
ecuménical family to
respond, and in 1993
established the WCC
Ecumenical Women’s
Solidarity Fund, to enable
crueles, flexible and
sensitive responses to needs
defined by local women in
many differing situations and
contexts throughout the
former Yugoslavia.
In response to these crimes,
the War Crimes Tribunal for
Former Yugoslavia was established in 1993 by the
U.N. Security Council, and a special legal adviser for
gender-related crimes was appointed to investigate
sexual assault crimes. The Tribunal has prosecuted
sexual crimes against women as crimes of
genocide, war crimes and crimes against humanity.

"Rape in the conduct of
armed conflict constitutes
a war crime and under
certain circumstances it
constitutes a crime
against humanity and
an act of genocide"

UN General Assembly 1997

how is WCC EWSF organized?
The fund is managed by the WCC EWSF registered
programme office in Croatia. The Programme
Coordinator is a WCC staff member and maintains
close administrative links with the WCC Diakonia &
Solidarity Team/Europe Desk in Geneva.

where does WCC EWSF work?
The EWSF operates throughout the territories of the
former Yugoslavia: Bosnia-Herzegovina, Croatia,
Republic of Macedonia, and Serbia & Montenegro
(including Kosovo).

who benefits from the WCC EWSF programme?
The EWSF considers that the female population has
specific needs and a specific role to play in the
process of reconciliation. The combatants
intentionally
targeted
women in the
conflict and
women were
particularly
victimised.
During the war
women
remained with
their families,
and in many
cases took on
the role of
decision-maker
and income-
generator for

practical solidarity
The Ecumenical Women’s Solidarity Fund was set
up to be a fast-acting and tangible instrument of
assistance to women and communities in need, and
was supported by individual churches, ecumenical
councils and related donor agencies of the World
Council of Churches throughout Europe and North
America. Since its creation, the EWSF has
supported over 320 projects throughout former
Yugoslavia. Women from all ethnic groups have
been included in a wide range of self-help initiatives
ranging from income-generation and skills training to
health programmes and psycho-social counseling.
From the outset, the Fund was to be used by women
for women to enable the most vulnerable to restore
their self-esteem, dignity and basic human rights,
and to offer support and
solidarity without imposing
culturally inappropriate or
insensitive ideas or
approaches. In the
experience gained in working
with women at grassroots
level, the EWSF has
succeeded in building up a
network founded on trust and
mutual respect and, in an
environment scarred by
division, has continued to
support women victims of
war and their families
regardless of nationality,
religious or ethnic
background.

The EWSF medical programme assists villagers, Central Bosnia
the family unit. As the force most often behind the restoration of the family unit, they are also integral to the rehabilitation of their communities. It has been the EWSF's experience that women at grassroots level have been instrumental in making the first reconciliatory steps towards women of other ethnic and religious groups, and renewing real dialogue. The people and groups involved in EWSF are made up primarily of women, children and youth. The EWSF pays particular attention to marginalized groups such as those with special needs, the elderly, Roma women and IDPs (Internally Displaced Persons).

what are WCC EWSF’s sectors of activity?
1. Counselling and Advocacy
2. Psycho-Social Support
3. Capacity Building
4. Peace and Reconciliation
5. Education and Training
6. Health
7. Legal and Justice Issues
8. Income Generation
9. Youth

what are WCC EWSF’s strategic objectives?
• To encourage, strengthen and empower women in the healing process within themselves and their communities
• To encourage self-determination for women victims of war
• To promote dialogue and reconciliation (with particular emphasis on cross-border/inter-ethnic initiatives)
• To support training and education for employment
• To support and promote women’s health care
• To increase women's access to information and networking
• To encourage legal support work with an accent on justice and women’s rights
• To raise awareness and nurture an understanding of ecumenism in the region and to encourage dialogue within communities

looking to the future
The 10th anniversary of the WCC EWSF programme is a time of celebration, but also of reflection about the future direction of the programme. The EWSF will also continue to assist local partners to address the sustainability of their programmes and organizations through capacity building in their fields of expertise. EWSF will increase activities in the fields of peace-building, conflict resolution and reconciliation, and seek to address prejudice, injustice and unemployment, the main concerns of women, who seek to regain control over their lives and build for their future. The times have changed, but the needs remain, and the ecumenical family, and the many churches and donors which have supported EWSF over the years, can still offer quiet and caring hands of solidarity.

For further information please contact:

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