



10 June 2014. The first thing you notice, when you step out of the car in Obrenovac, the flooded suburb of Belgrade, is the smell. It does not come from the gardens of the houses: the watering of the roses has certainly not been neglected this year.

It is something else: the stench of stagnant water and blocked sewers.

The water level has of course receded considerably since the floods that ravaged Serbia, Bosnia-Herzegovina and Croatia 13-15 May, when the average 3 month rainfall fell in 3 days, but water still remains. As a result of the flooding, 34 persons died in Serbia and 30,000 people were evacuated from their homes. More than 50 died in the three countries combined and over 70,000 were evacuated. Not only floods but also [landslides](#) have caused serious problems.

Obrenovac was particularly hard hit by the floods and many of its 80,000 inhabitants had to be evacuated, some in dramatic circumstances.



Among the survivors were Milan and Sanja Petkovic. Their house was completely flooded and

possibly destroyed. During a visit by Irena Vojáčková-Sollorano , the UN Resident Coordinator in Serbia, they point at a line above the window of their one floor house, which shows the highest water level. “Everything is destroyed,” they say referring to their belongings.

Inside the house there are water soaked sofas no one will doze on anymore; a dinner table that will no longer host family dinners; a desk that will not be used for writing and muddy floors that no one knows how will look like, once they have dried.

They will hardly be “hoovered” by the vacuum cleaner, which lies full of mud in between the roses in the rose garden. The owners managed to save three virtually newborn kittens from the floods. One of them licks its fur on the pavement and at least the cats can take care of themselves in the colossal and costly cleaning effort that lies ahead.

The financial loss is catastrophic for the family but so is the psychological shock; the floods are virtually unprecedented. Outside their house, as well as all other houses in their street, there is a pile of what now is rubbish, but used to be the things that together constitute what we call a home. A small teddy bear sits on the top of the heap.

But once the rest of the destroyed furniture and belongings, has been removed from the house it has no place to go and just pile up on the pavement outside. There are already 30,000 tons and counting of uncollected waste in the town and at full capacity – many trucks are out of order after the floods- 500 tons can be removed daily. Irena Vojackova-Sollorano tells the couple that she has just been talking to the local authorities about this and promises help. A couple of days later the army makes an effort, but a new problem has to be dealt with: shortage of landfills.



Specialists say that there is little hope that the water will recede until after ten days, since the main rivers Sava and Donau are still not back to normal.

”It is a big problem and until the Sava river goes further down it is difficult to get rid of the remaining water,” says Michael Elmquist, the leader of a UN Team of experts (UNDAC), which has [assessed the impact of the floods](#) . ”The underground water level has risen as a consequence of the floods and that takes long time to go down again. That again affects the houses that are flooded,.”

The biggest concern for the time being is that the sewage systems can´t be operational until the impatient inhabitants can get rid of the water.

"Yes there are [health issues](#) and it needs to be further assessed, but obviously when the sewage system is not functioning, that will of course cause health issues."

WHO, the World Health Organization, continues to monitor the situation and help local health authorities.

As Michael Elmquist points out one cannot compare floods in Serbia and Bangladesh. "However," he points out "People here are not used to this and they are deeply shocked."

Irena Vojáčková-Sollorano, the UN Resident Coordinator in Serbia, says that the UN will support the government in their recovery efforts.

"We definitely see that help is required from the international community not least because Serbia has never seen floods and landslides on this scale before, and therefore lacks specialists on the ground and this is where we come in."



Meanwhile, Milan and Sanja Petkovic, stay with relatives in Belgrade and have to spend 2 hours to commute from the capital to the suburb and then other 2 to get back. Unfortunately they are not helped by the climate since it is unusually cold for the season and it rains from time to time. At least they don't have to worry about the roses that grow wild in the garden.

However much help Serbia gets from its international friends, much will depend on nature when the smell of the well watered roses will overcome the stench of blocked sewage in Obrenovac.

*Main photo: Milan Petkovic, resident of Obrenovac shows Irena Vojáčková-Sollorano, the UN Resident Coordinator in Serbia and her team how high the water level was at the height of the floods in mid May. UNCT Serbia/Djordje Novakovic.*

*Other photos: Árni Snævarr/UNRIC.*