



REUTERS

**MARINE MAMMAL:** Farmers retrieve livestock after the spring flooding in Serbia and Montenegro.

## THE BALKANS

### Spring rains flood border area

■ Torrential rains battered the border area between Romania, Serbia and Montenegro and Hungary in April, flooding thousands of homes and disrupting rail and road traffic, Reuters news service reported.

Romania's environment ministry that in Timis county, 2,500 houses and 30,000 hectares of crops were destroyed by floodwaters.

The local government put the army on flood alert as many villages came under nearly 2 metres of water.

The government granted USD 202,200 in emergency food and basic supplies to 2,000 villagers who had been evacuated. But many others, risking their lives, preferred to sleep in the lofts of their clay-built houses for fear of looting.

In the city of Arad, near the border with Hungary, hundreds of communist-era apartment blocks and streets were flooded and stranded residents used rubber boats to get around.

In neighbouring Serbia and Montenegro, hundreds of homes were flooded and dozens of livestock drowned in the village of Jasa Tomic. Most of the 3,000 residents fled to nearby towns.

### Ski plan leaves NGOs cold

■ Plans to develop parts of Rila Mountain into a ski-tourist resort would infringe on the integrity of Rila National Park, casting doubts on its candidacy for a PAN Parks certificate, the Worldwide Fund for Nature (WWF) has announced.

Developers of the project, called "Super Borovets," are considering three alternative versions of the resort, but even a compromise option that uses existing ski trails in the park would eventually lead to further encroachments, say opponents. WWF is co-operating closely with the park's administration to preserve Rila's candidacy for PAN Park verification.

Environmental NGOs hope that Rila, about 100 kilometres south of Sofia, doesn't go the same way as neighbouring Pirin National Park. A ski resort was carved out of that park above the village of Bansko in the early 1980s and it has been radically expanded in recent years despite similar environmental objections.

## DANUBE DISPATCH

### Information flow helps the river

■ The Global Environment Facility and United Nations Development Programme have reaffirmed the importance of public participation in improving Danube water quality by earmarking funds for this purpose in the second phase of the Danube Regional Project (DRP).

The group tasked to carry out the project is a partnership of the Regional Environmental Center for Central and Eastern Europe, Resources for the Future, and the New York University School of Law.

Their work focuses on five new Danube-basin countries: Bosnia-Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Croatia, Romania, Serbia and Montenegro. The initiative helps government officials at different levels in their implementation of the public participation requirements of the Water Framework Directive (WFD) and the Aarhus Convention.

The project began in each country with experts carefully evaluating existing laws and practices. A meeting was held in each country to discuss these assessments and identify priority challenges. Country by country, the project participants will develop concrete programmes to address these challenges over the course of the 28-month project and test these solutions through local demonstration projects located at Danube River hot spots.

Sharing will go on at a regional level, as well. The first such regional meeting was held April 25-26 at the REC head office in Szentendre. Many common problems became apparent. Several countries have weak national legislation or need to develop more specific legal proce-

dures to implement the Aarhus Convention, the WFD and other relevant directives. Others need practical mechanisms such as information centres or training for the personnel tasked to handle public information requests, so that they respond in a consistent manner. Throughout the course of the project, participants from all five countries will continue to share results and ideas.

The project will work with government officials and NGOs during the remainder of the project to meet their needs. Local experts will write and disseminate desk books for government personnel in the local language of each country, so that officials "behind the desk" understand the importance of responding to information requests in a timely fashion and do so efficiently. Other manuals will be prepared to inform the public about what information the government has, how to obtain it, and what to do in case of government inaction or an outright refusal to provide requested information.

Country representatives raised a few special needs. In some countries, officials deny information on the grounds that it contains confidential business matters or national security, despite the lack of rules clarifying what is legitimately exempt and what should be provided the public. In some countries, the project will help develop regular systems to address this issue. Another special request was to help countries that need to develop stakeholder involvement in river basin management to conform to the requirements of the WFD.