

## FROM BOSNIA TO MALAYSIA In Quest of a Safe Haven

by Chapal Bashar back from Kuala Lumpur

A long refugee trail all the way from the strife-torn Yugoslavia, to a sleepy suburban town Kajang, some 20 km from Kuala Lumpur, the capital of Malaysia, has become part of the changing, unpredictable scene of our contemporary world. Over 300 Bosnian Muslims have covered this journey, moving from one climate to another, from a mountainous region to the flat plains of South-East Asia, from one lifestyle to another — but in the process finding safety and security in a friendly atmosphere.

For these families, with whom this correspondent spent some hours, it was an escape from terror, and possible massacre of innocent women and children, not to mention of an uncertain future.

Talking to them sometime in English or through interpreter, the overriding feeling that one detected among them was one of utter relief often expressed in the smiles of the children, relaxed faces of women and the warmth of older ones.

At this moment, most of them are not thinking of their future in Malaysia where they are being treated as asylum-seekers rather than refugees. It is not clear how many of them would like to go back to Bosnia or to some other countries which would accept them as European Muslims.

But at this moment, no one, neither the Bosnian Muslims nor the hosts in Malaysia want to be very specific about their future plan.

However, visitors from Bosnia are more communicative about what they have gone through in their country which is now bleeding to death under Serb-Croat aggression.

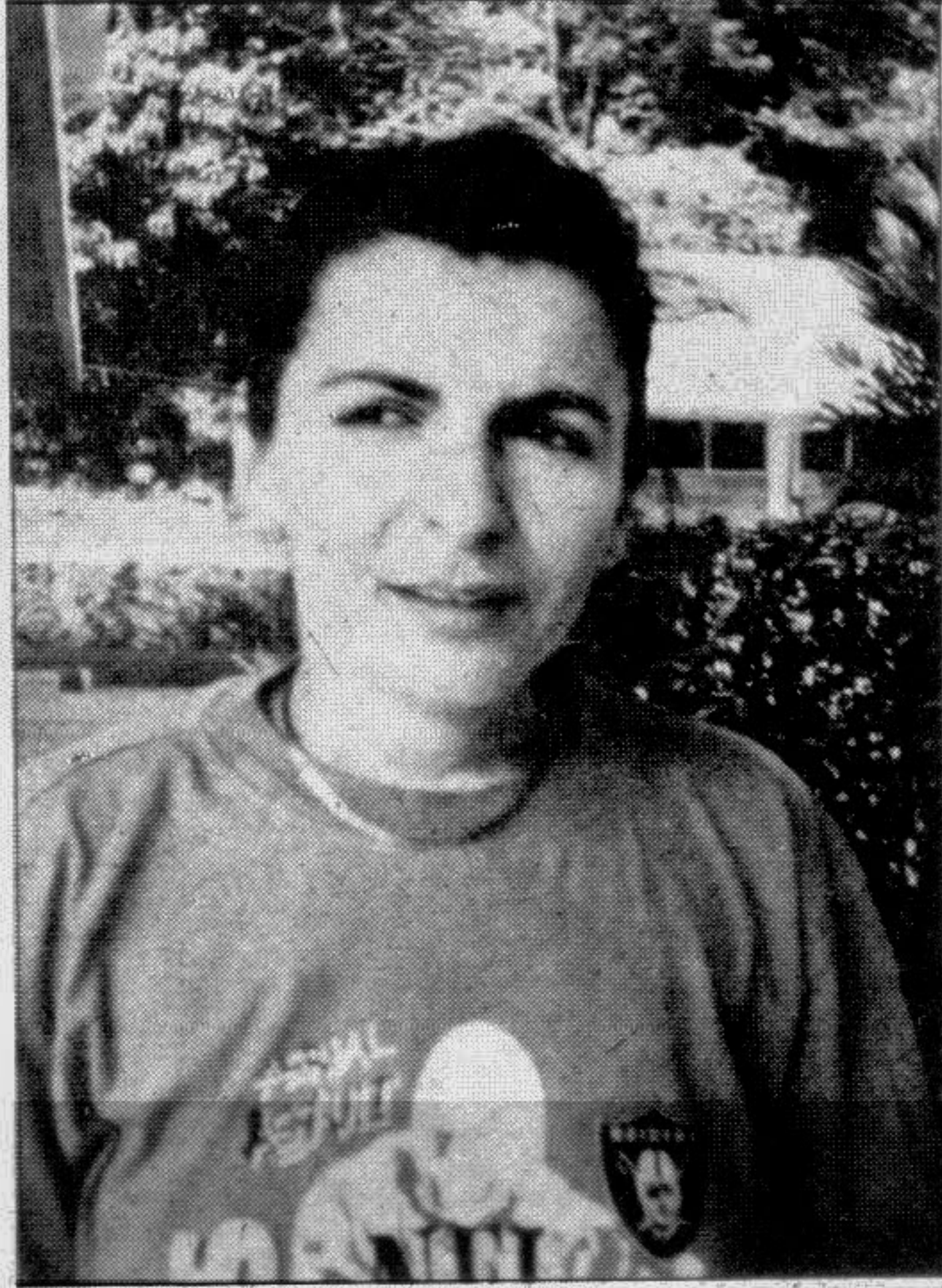
"We are safe here — we have shelter, food and everything we



Bosnian women and children talk to the Star correspondent at Kajang camp.



"We are safe here"



Dr. Ermina: Describing the woes.



Rasema with son: Husband killed in Bosnia.



Sanela: I want to go back home.

need, yet, our hearts still remain in Bosnia — our home. We want to go back there." This was the feeling of the Bosnians now having asylum in Malaysia.

The 300 plus Bosnian Muslims, mostly women and children, are living in different camps in Malaysia. These unfortunates were brought about eight months ago from the war-ravaged state in East Europe.

Muslim Youth Movement of Malaysia, known in short as ABIM, along with some other voluntary organisations look after the Bosnians who are housed there.

"We are living here in a different atmosphere, culture and language — however, after eight months we are used to it", said Dr Ermina, 29, a physician by profession, reached Kuala Lumpur with the first group of

Bosnian refugees in October last year with her two sons, Muamer and Tarik. Ermina's husband Mirsad Mujadzic, also a doctor, is working with the Bosnian army to fight against the aggression of Serbs and Croats.

Ermina had a cosy home at Prijedor, a town in north Bosnia, where she worked as a general practitioner at a government hospital. She had been living there for some years with her husband and children, but her blissful days did not last long. Just 15 months back, Prijedor fell victim to Serb-Croat attacks — many of the Bosnian Muslims were killed and their properties destroyed.

Ermina managed to escape from the invaded town with her children and reached Zagreb, the Croatian capital, braving a long and arduous journey. Ermina found a transient shelter in Zagreb while her husband stayed back in Bihac (west Bosnia).

"Bihac is now besieged by Serbs, there is no electricity and fuel in the town, shortage of food and water is also acute", said Ermina in a choked voice.

Ermina gratefully mentioned of Merhamet, a relief organisation of Zagreb, which helped her and many others to have an asylum in Malaysia. ABIM has also opened an office in Zagreb for a better coordination in relief operations.

At the ABIM centre in Kajang, Dr Ermina looks after medical treatment of women and children with the assistance of local physicians.

Ermina is the only one in the camp who is fluent in English and helped this correspondent a lot to communicate with others.

Husbands of most of the women at ABIM centre are in Bosnia fighting the Serbs and the Croats while some have been killed in the war.

"Where is your husband now?", one woman accompanying her 7-year-old son, was asked. She understood the question, but did not or could not answer. She was mute, with tears of grief.

Ermina narrated the story of Rasema Delimustafic, 28. Her husband Mustafa and many others were killed during a Serbian attack on Olovo, an east Bosnian town, in September last year. Rasema took shelter in a camp under protection of Bosnian army, but could not avert Serbian brutality. The camp was heavily shelled one night in which Rasema's right leg was badly injured.

After recovery, Rasema and her son took shelter in Zagreb, and later were flown to Malaysia. Her mother and sister took refuge somewhere in Germany, but she is unaware about her other close and dear ones who are still in Bosnia.

Nurkic Subhija, 35, is living in the camp with her three children — one teenage girl and two boys. Her husband Sahabit is in Bosnia fighting the Serbs.

Subhija, a factory worker, was living with her family in Bugajno city which was also besieged by Serbian army since the beginning of the aggression. This city was also attacked by mortars and shells that killed many.

"We found a way to escape from the Bugajno city and took shelter in a safer place in Croatia", stayed there for six months and then went to Vienna", said Subhija who flew in to Kuala Lumpur seven months ago.

Her daughter Sanela, 14 said, "We want to go back home, as soon as possible, but not in the situation prevailing there now."

Education for Sanela and other boys and girls of the camp have been arranged by ABIM. *Continued on page 11*

## Promoting Peace and Harmony Shabana Azmi in Berkeley

by Aasha Mehreen Amin back from USA

It was a choice between Peter O'Toole's inauguration of his book at Cody's bookstore, or a lecture on communal violence by Shabana Azmi. The latter being closer to 'home', the choice was inevitable.

On April 18, 1993 in a well lit auditorium at the University of California, Berkeley, scores of Indians, a handful of Pakistanis and Bangladeshis buzzed with anticipation for their favourite actress. The event had been arranged by an organisation Coalition Against Communalism (CAC) formed by the concerned people of Indian origin in the San Francisco Bay area.

She arrived with as little fuss as possible. In a simple black kurta pajama, her hair cut short but as a matter of fact, Shabana Azmi still could not avoid the slight tremor of excitement around the auditorium.

For the four-time National

award winner for best acting on the occasion was far removed from the glitter of Bollywood.

tant at the grassroots level and communalists are giving bigoted interpretation of religion to mobilize people. We have to tell the people that what they (the communalists) are preaching is not religion."

Azmi called for a stronger leadership of liberal Muslims in bringing peace. Said Azmi, "the liberal Muslim does not rise to help the community because of the fear of being called fundamentalist. He must therefore take a much more active role. We should decide whether we are looking for a mosaic or a melting pot."

Azmi also pointed out that there was already strong integration in India at certain levels where people were more concerned with survival than religious differences, and that was the answer that liberal Muslims should work for.

Yet how feasible was this idea? Change, admitted Azmi, would take a very long time. She urged that working at the



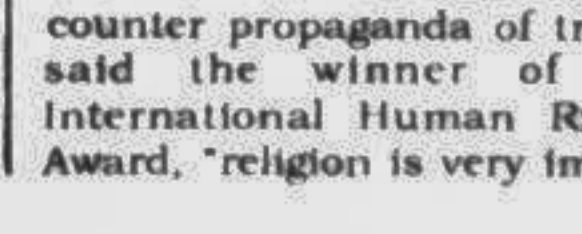
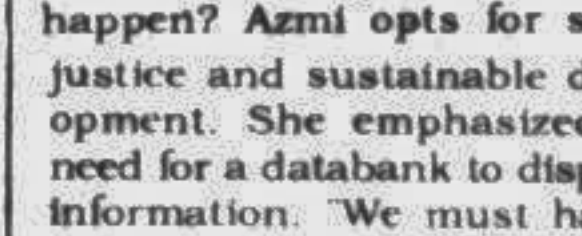
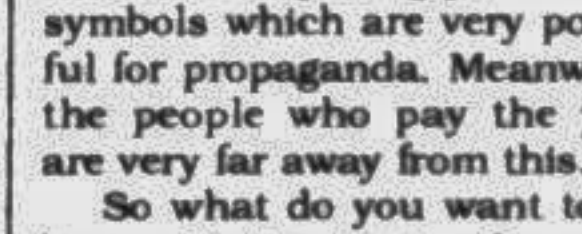
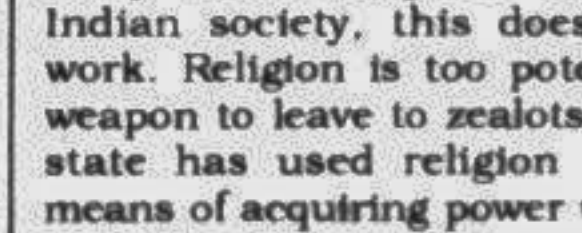
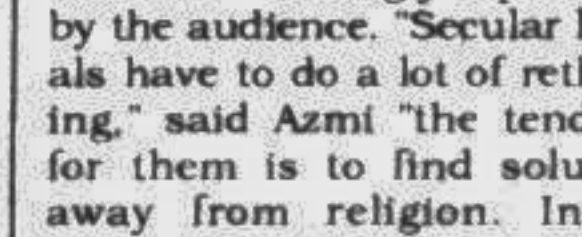
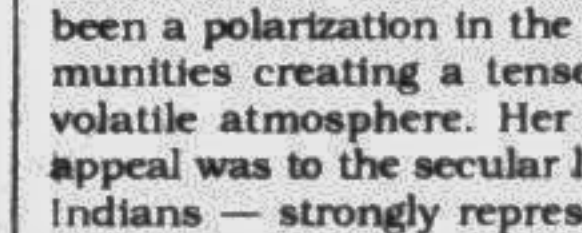
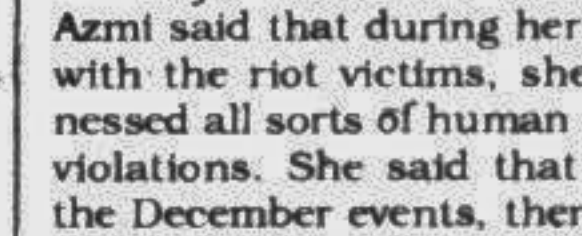
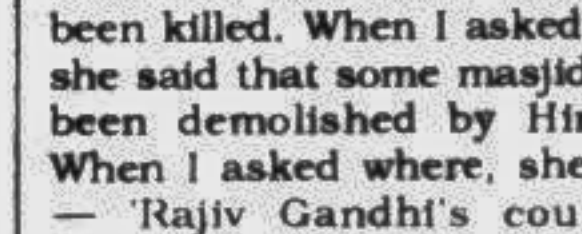
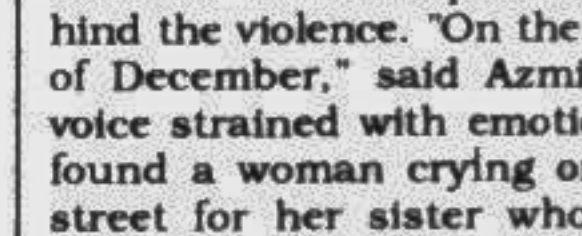
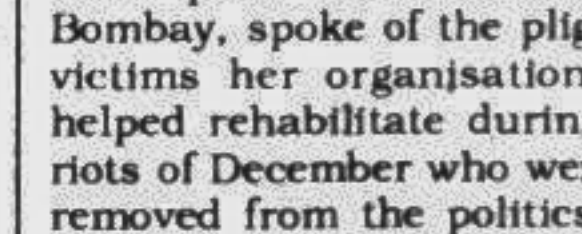
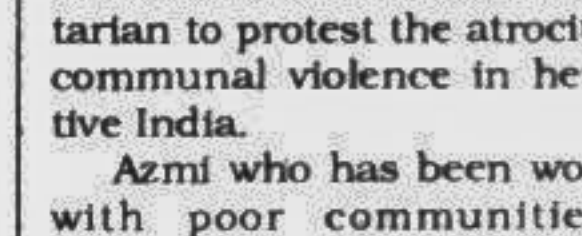
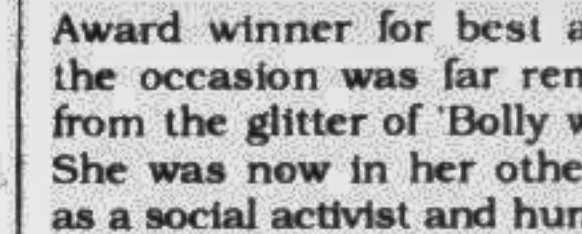
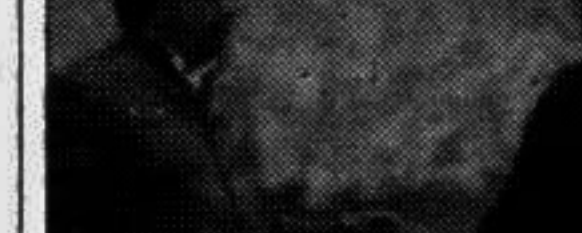
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Shabana Azmi: Far removed from the glitter of 'Bollywood'



BELOW

Answering a question by a member of the audience at Wheeler auditorium, Berkeley



grassroots level and getting people in touch with their self esteem was essential so that every person would want this change. "Communalism is the worst danger we are facing," said Azmi, "and this means both kinds — majority (Hindu) communalism and minority (Muslim) communalism, because they reinforce each other. We are waking up to the fact that India can only survive if secular."

Shabana Azmi's love for peace and social justice dates far back from the Babri Masjid incidents. When playwright Salfar Hashmi was brutally murdered on New Year's Day 1989, Azmi protested the murder of the dedicated street theatre writer in front of the then Minister for Broadcasting and Information.

Other acts of violence all over South Asia prompted her to join Swami Agnivesh in a Padajatra from Delhi to Meerut to promote religious harmony, to talk to people and give them courage and hope.

In the same spirit, Shabana Azmi came to the slums of Bombay going on a hunger strike that lasted for five days to protest the demolition of slums by the government, in the name of cleaning the city.

Azmi got involved in the 'Save Narmada' movement to protest the building of the dam which would uproot thousands of people and destroy the environment. And now she had come all the way to Berkeley to appeal to Indians living abroad to support her in her fight against violence.

With her twinkling eyes that promise wit and laughter and easy, down to earth manner, it is not hard to understand why she has won the hearts of so many. Even as the heartthrob of millions of film addicts, her other role as a dedicated social activist committed to peace, is hardly surprising.

## Bosnia's Muslims: Palestinians of Europe?

by Hazhir Teimourian

The world woke up suddenly last year to the existence of a country called Bosnia when fighting broke out there between its three communities, the Muslims, the Serbs and the Croats. A common question is why are the Muslims known by their religion while the others are referred to by nationality? Gemini News Service's Middle East expert searches the history books for clues about a people who could become the stateless society of Europe.



Images of Sarajevo

Much of city of Sarajevo retains a physical style long lost in older European cities

one of the main religions only gradually.

Those among them who converted to the Eastern church gravitated towards the nearest Serbian monastery and became known as Serbs. Others, mainly in the south and west, became Catholic Croats. The remainder stayed, or became, Muslim.

This is a simplified version of the Bosnians' history. As an part of the original inhabitants of the land, there has been a regular infusion of Serbian and Croat blood into the population through immigration, and some people have

come from farther afield, such as Muslim Turkish officials from Istanbul, who settled in Bosnia after their mission ended.

The numbers of these newcomers have been relatively small and the Turks, in particular, were not numerous enough to change either the language or the national identity of their fellow Muslims in Bosnia.

In recent times, the Yugoslav ruler Marshal Josip Tito, himself a Croat, had a political desire to cut the dominant Serbian element down to

size. Therefore, he recognised the Muslims of Bosnia for the first time as a separate nation, defining them by their Islamic culture in order to create a rival element to the Serbs in multinational Bosnia.

He also gave political autonomy to the Albanian Muslims of the province of Kosovo within Serbia itself. Later, some militant Muslims, such as Alija Izetbegovic, now president of Bosnia, played into the hands of militant Serbs and Croats by going to prison for their religion.

On the whole, the Muslims of Bosnia were never as militant as their Christian counterparts among the Serbs and Croats. While the Christian clergy published strident periodicals, the Muslim imams of Bosnia preferred to stay clear of politics.

Another point about the republic needs to be explained: Why is it called Bosnia-Herzegovina? The second part of the name simply means 'the Dukedom', and is reminiscent of a time in the middle of the 15th Century when a chieftain by the name of Stephen Vukic rebelled and forced the ruler of Bosnia to recognise his region as an independent principality. Herzegovina, too, later fell under the Turks.

The present war in Bosnia is easily the most horrendous in the country's bloody history. But if it results in the dispossession of the Muslims, with their eviction, it would also end, in effect, if not in name, the story of Bosnia.

The Muslims would then, in all probability, become an embittered refugee population scattered in a number of neighbouring European countries and in a number of refugee camps under the United Nations. They could become the Palestinians of Europe.

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