

# Where Kosovo Refugees are Finding Help

The second biggest expatriate community in Switzerland is from Kosovo. In the French-speaking part of the country an organisation unique in Europe is feeding, clothing and training the Kosovars as well as helping to educate the children. Gemini News Service reports on its work. **Robert James Parsons** writes from Geneva

**A**S the situation in Kosovo deteriorates into mayhem and destruction, generating more and more refugees, no country in the world beyond Yugoslavia is more touched than Switzerland.

Germany has the world's biggest Kosovar expatriate community — about 350,000 spread among 80 million Germans. Switzerland's estimated 200,000 Kosovars, the second biggest community, live among fewer than seven million Swiss.

The fragility of the lives of refugees was brought dramatically before the Swiss public during the last week of January by the suicide of a 15-year-old Kosovar girl in Geneva.

Social workers and humanitarian aid groups say the young are most vulnerable because they are least well equipped to deal with the stress of their uprooting and the negative image imposed on them by so many of their hosts.

Switzerland's ties to Kosovo go back to the 1960s, when tens of thousands of Kosovars began coming here to work in a country chronically short of labour. Then circumstances converged to change the situation drastically.

First, of course, was the break up of Yugoslavia in 1991. Soon after, Switzerland said Yugoslavia was not a country from which labour had been regularly recruited and imposed strict visa requirements to keep as many Yugoslavs away as possible.

Over 20,000 Kosovars with only seasonal visas were suddenly excluded from the Swiss labour market. On a cautious reckoning, the money these men had been sending home each year totalled £110 million, a massive infusion in a country where £100 a month would keep a large extended family comfortably.

The result was a rapid and serious deterioration of the living conditions of whole villages and regions. In the vicious circle this set in motion, Switzerland found itself faced with a flood of requests for political asylum as seasonal workers refused to leave. These were joined by those fleeing the Belgrade government's repression. A year of open warfare has only increased the flood.

These people now constitute Switzerland's second biggest foreign community — after the Italians, who at least have the advantage of being in a country where Italian is one of the official languages.

In that part of Switzerland where High German (known as

Alemannic) is the official but largely unused language and where two-thirds of the Swiss live, Kosovars are routinely vilified.

The tabloid press calls them drug dealers, war-hardened, violence-prone vagrants just one generation removed from cave dwellers.

The French-speaking part of the country is more restrained, even compassionate, because of the work of an institution in Geneva called the Université Populaire Albanaise (UPA). 'Populaire' in the French sense means of, by and for the little people.

The UPA was founded in 1996 by Ueli Leuenberger, a long-time labour organiser and militant for immigrants' rights and is unique in Europe.

which is just as urgently needed for those arriving with only the tattered clothes on their backs as shoes, socks, shirts and everything else.

Day care is provided for women with children. Special women's groups and courses are always on offer to help women, many from patriarchal village societies, to cope with urban living in one of the world's most subsidised cities.

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courses in maths, painting and drawing, and Albanian history and geography.

With subsidies from the state (canton) of Geneva, from the city of Geneva as well as from charitable organisations, the UPA employs a handful of regular, full-time staff and almost 100 volunteers, staying open 14 hours a day, seven days a week, 364 days a year.

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It is an information centre, a meeting and gathering place, an educational and training institute, a venue for contact between Swiss and immigrants, and the main focal point of Geneva's biggest expatriate community.

When the Swiss authorities last year deliberately slowed refugee registration, hundreds of the unregistered were left on the streets, without the right to refuse shelter, food or clothing, often for several weeks.

The UPA mobilised emergency relief in conjunction with the Salvation Army and the Geneva Protestant chaplaincy.

At one point it was feeding hundreds of unregistered people a day. A classroom was turned into a clothing bank for them.

Among the seemingly minor matters for which money had to be found was the purchase of several thousand sets of men's underwear. Clothing donations rarely turn up this commodity.

service in Tirana. As scenes of destruction succeed each other on the screens, someone distressed by something he has recognised slips out the door and stands stricken in the passage outside.

The UPA believes these people need education and training, whether they go back to Kosovo or stay in Switzerland. So it organises two major training programmes, one in restaurant management and catering and one in electronics and appliance repair.

The first has given rise to Cafe Prishtina, where an elegant, three-course lunch is served from Monday to Friday for about £6. The second has been the salvation of many a householder overwhelmed by the exorbitant cost of living in Switzerland.

The writer is a US-born reporter covering UN and other international affairs from Geneva. He writes regularly for *Le Courrier*.

## New Growth 'Tracks' in India

Southern Railway's efforts to attract freight traffic must be seen in the context of the road sector eating into its passenger and goods movement. Rail infrastructure being much cheaper than forming roads, the Railways has been trying to impress on the Centre that it should fund the former — a move that will lead to a reduction in freight rates, writes **N. Ramakrishnan**.

**D**ESPITE the general recession in the economy, Southern Railway is well on line to improving on its last year's freight handling performance, even if only marginally. While coal, POL, foodgrains, fertilisers and cement continue to form the bulk of the freight handled, Southern Railway hopes to attract new cargoes to counter the new competition from the road sector.

This effort significance in the context of the ongoing gauge conversion work started during the Eighth Plan as part of 'Project Unigauge'. With 78 per cent of its network — covering all the major passenger and freight traffic routes — expected to have broad-gauge lines in the next five years, Southern Railway is highlighting the fact that industries in the South will have quicker and easier access to both raw materials and markets in other regions.

Southern Railway's efforts to attract new freight traffic needs to be viewed in the context of the road sector eating into its passenger and goods movement; which is also generally the case with the Indian Railways. With the road transport sector having a distinct advantage vis-a-vis price, Southern Railway could see a further fall in the quantity of cement it moves. Also, the move by oil companies to put in place a network of pipelines could also affect the Southern Railway as three of these pipelines will fall within its jurisdiction.

On the passenger front, in sections where broad-gauge lines have replaced the metre gauge tracks, there has been a clear reduction in travel time. And once the services stabilise, in the next few months, Southern Railway hopes to be able to speed up the trains some more and also examine the possibility of introducing new services, at least during the day. For instance, the recently opened Tiruchi-Dindigul BG line should help the Southern Railway cut down the running time of trains between Chennai and Tiruchi, and Chennai and Madurai, by at least 30 minutes. Also, Southern Railway hopes to complete gauge conversion

work on the Chingleput-Arakkonam section by 1999 end after which it will be possible to divert some of the long-distance trains that now pass through Chennai besides introducing a circular service on the Chennai-Chingleput-Arakkonam-Chennai section.

The gauge conversion work in Southern Railway got a push with the general manager, Mr. N. Krishnaswami, according top priority to the projects and ensuring that there were no delays. The Villupuram-Thanjavur mainline gauge conversion work is awaiting the Planning Commission's clearance. Recently, the Southern Railway started work on the Madurai-Rameswaram section and the work is expected to be completed in four-five years depending on the flow of funds. This project also involves work on the Pamban bridge, and the Southern Railway is expected to shortly appoint a consultant to suggest how that is to be done. The Quilon-Tenkasi-Virudhunagar-Tirunelveli-Tiruchendur and the Cuddalore-Vridhachalam-Salem gauge conversion projects are next on line.

These attempts by the Southern Railway to increase freight traffic and, at the same time, upgrade passenger services, will help improve track utilisation and operational efficiency. For that is the only way the Railways can mop up additional resources to meet its needs at a time when support from the general exchequer has been declining continuously and there is a simultaneous drop in the Railways' share of both passenger and freight traffic compared to the road sector.

The Indian Railways has been steadily losing its share of both passenger and freight traffic to the road sector, which offers more competitive rates. From a share of 89 per cent of the freight traffic and 80 per cent of passenger traffic in 1950-51, the Railways now accounts for only 40 per cent of the freight traffic and 20 per cent of the passenger traffic. This dramatic shift and the phenomenal growth in the

san-Mangalore gauge conversion where work has been completed up to Sakleshpur. Once completed, the line will offer better access to the Mangalore port and also provide easier access to the Konkan Railway.

Over the last five years, Southern Railway's freight earnings have gone up by 74 per cent while that from passenger traffic by 67 per cent. It has increased its freight traffic from 19,015 million tonnes in 1993-94 to 27,528 million tonnes in 1997-98 and hopes to end this financial year with about 28,30 million tonnes.

Coal will continue to be the major cargo that Southern Railway moves, and this is expected to increase further as a number of thermal stations are coming up in the region.

While there has been a shift of cement to road as that sector offers 20-30 per cent cheaper freight rates, the Southern Railway hopes that the new cement and clinker plants coming up in the region will boost cement traffic. POL movement has been growing at 5-7 per cent per annum and this traffic will be hit a little if the oil companies' proposal to have a pipeline network materialises. This means that the Southern Railway's POL traffic will at best remain stagnant. Foodgrains and fertilisers, the other major cargoes moved by road, will continue to grow by 3-4 per cent every year.

The Southern Railway has tied up with the Container Corporation of India (Concor) to consolidate cargo and move it by rail. This traffic has picked up in the last few months and is expected to increase once the container depot at Koodal Nagar near Madurai is ready. Another new cargo that is being moved by railway is cars. The Southern Railway has loaded

about 15 rakes so far for Hyundai Motors India Ltd to move its cars to New Delhi and Mumbai in 4-5 days. After Ford India Ltd begins production at its Maraimalai Nagar (near Chennai) plant, the Southern Railway hopes it will move more cars than now.

Besides, the Southern Railway is also loading tractors for TAFE. When Toyota's project in Karnataka takes off, the number of automobiles transported by rail to destinations in the North and the West is expected to increase substantially. A prototype for a two-tier car carrier is getting ready at Golden Rock, Tiruchi. With these efforts, Southern Railway hopes to sustain its freight traffic growth and handle 35-37 million tonnes in the next three-four years, according to Mr. Krishnaswami.

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## Bangladesh and the Islamic World

by Abul M Ahmad

*Bangladesh is the third largest Muslim nation in the world, and we have to behave accordingly. The pending issue has to be faced squarely, to round up our policy.*

**H**OW is Bangladesh making its presence felt in the Islamic World? Is she a passenger (with 120 million voices) in the comity of Muslim nations? Active participation at the global foreign policy level should not be acutely inhibited by the GNP/GDP inferiority complex (the entitlement syndrome). Our foreign policy has to have a distinct sense of flavour and direction, although the footprints ahead would be short and slow.

Are we advancing, stationary, or retreating? We have to think of internal progress, and the impact abroad. The image of Bangladesh is hardly improving at home and abroad. Thanks to whom? It is a very pertinent question as we enter the 21st century.

The foreign affairs appraisal has three distinct angles: global, regional, and Islamic (assuming we are internally to sit down together to back up our own logo for the world to see; in other words, PR or public relations). Of course we are in the 'also ran' category due to our limitations and constraint as an under-developed country having just started to develop, in fits and starts, during the three decades of turbulent romance with Miss Freedom. The changes in stands, with the changes of regimes, are more marginal than affecting the core strategies. What we see through historical eyes are two

with the new family? These four states of ambiguity have to be analysed, assessed, and reported to the nation, for providing a sense of direction to the joint effort of the human resources grappling with the nation-building activities.

Unfortunately, there has hardly been any degree of unanimity in approach even after 27 years of winning, gaining or grabbing independence. One example of what some of the citizens are thinking. The Daily Star of Dec 27 carried a comment, 'Bangladesh: a rancorous encounter with history' by Prof M Rashiduzzaman at the U of Rowan, USA; wherein he has raised some very pertinent questions for the leaders of the society, including the politicians.

This comment is confined to the relationship with the world of the Muslim countries. There are two types of picture, one inside the documents, and the other in fresh air which the mass can see, feel, and act upon (the sense of participation).

This image is a continuous process, regardless of the change of regimes in Dhaka. The political lead has to be backed up by the nation without the presence of the partisan spirit. The changes in stands, with the changes of regimes, are more marginal than affecting the core strategies. What we see through historical eyes are two

distressing signals: there have

been gaps and discontinuities, and there have been changes in policy stands which have been noticed by the affected circles, however trifling or foreboding.

Before we look at the Muslim countries, we have to look at ourselves, and point out to the citizens, and then to the world at large, what is our style, how far we are willing to go, and where do we stop.

As for the latter, there are internal differences in approach to some complex and confusing issues bubbling inconsistently, as religious empathy appeals more to the heart (faith) than to the head (logic, rationality). But man cannot live without a religion; it is there in the background all the time; sometimes a nuisance, but most of the time like the invisible air we breathe.

We are living in a fast changing world, and religious issues, if any, take time to settle amicably.

The communication gap is very sensitive in this sector, and causes rapid misunderstanding and provocations, and mole hills are blown up to the size of mountains. The national policy has to be clear-cut, whatever it is, if there are some problems in some areas, the same may be examined in the right spirit.

We come to a subtle point: how much it should be invisible or visible; and how much it should be allowed to come into the foreground (if it is usually in

the background). Side issues do crop up from time to time, artificial, political, or emotional. It is a sensitive topic, hence must be handled swiftly and tactfully. Islam has been tested sufficiently for a pretty long period to iron out the teething troubles. Islam is stable, practical, and it works.

With the Islamic world, our policy has to be clear, and active; the latter however micro. The degree and kind are left to the leaders to enunciate and practise (after consensus in the parliament). At present we are more active on regional lines. Our neighbours are rather isolated, for reasons not secret.

More attention has to be paid to our rightful place, and contribution, in the Muslim world. We cannot ignore it, or be indifferent. The religious grouping is working strongly at the global level at the present time (Bosnia, Kosovo, Iraq, Iran, CIS, together with the weakening of the UN system), although the Christian west is using different terminologies to mask their strategies.

Bangladesh is the third largest Muslim nation in the world, and we have to behave accordingly. The pending issue has to be faced squarely, to round up our policy.

## A Home that Turns Destitutes into Entrepreneurs

Anjali Deshpande writes from Ranchi

*Kilkari has opened up several possibilities for these children who have been left to fend for themselves. Tileswar, who started working at a roadside eatery at the age of 10, is today caretaker at Kilkari.*

**F**OR a 13-year-old, Mahendra Kumar Sahu is extraordinarily enterprising. He quit washing dishes and serving tea at a roadside eatery to set up his own business — selling peanuts on the streets of Ranchi in the eastern state of Bihar. Mahendra had a role model in Laldev Kushwaha, two years his senior, who left the grinding work in a hotel to cook and sell 'duska', a local fried savoury, about two years ago. He makes about Rs 1,200 (\$28) a month, sends Rs 2,000 (\$47) home every three months and is easily the richest in his peer group.

Their new-found confidence can be traced to their life at Kilkari, a child rehabilitation-cum-educational centre — the first "home" they have had since their parents abandoned them to the mercy of their employers.

Both Mahendra and Laldev, who belong to Hazaribagh district, were packed off at a tender age of nine and 10, respectively, to work in roadside food stalls at Ranchi so that their siblings back home could be fed. In the tribal dominated district of Ranchi, children are not farmed out as workers, for most people have land and there is more than enough work to do in the fields.

Child workers in the city usually hail from Hazaribagh and some from Palamau, one of the poorer districts. Parents

bring them here and abandon them to the mercy of employers once they have ensured that the child is paid a minimal amount and the rest of the wages is either sent to them or saved till they come to collect it. There are about 300 such children in Ranchi who work in its tea stalls and roadside cafes. They are expected to put in 12 hours of work for a pittance of Rs 250-400 (\$6.95) a month. Most of them belong to the landless, scheduled or backward caste families of Hazaribagh. Most have four or five siblings back home and fathers who prefer getting drunk to earning for the large brood they have begotten.

The scene changed somewhat in 1995 when the district administration stepped in to regulate working hours and provide minimum education to these children as part of its drive for universalisation of education. Out of this drive was born Kilkari, literally meaning 'a sound of joy,' rehabilitation-cum-educational centre.

Housed in a night shelter built for homeless workers of the city, Kilkari has a full-time caretaker and two instructors who come in every evening to teach the boarders for three hours. "The idea is to impart skills to the children so that they are able to get out of the back-breaking labour that has been thrust upon them," M K Jamuar, member-secretary, district education council and a founder member of Kilkari, told the Women's Feature Service. But, despite the patronage of the district administration, Kilkari has only 22 children living on the premises. "They keep moving around. Some leave the city in search of better paying jobs," explains Rajeev Karan, assistant project officer.

Kilkari is not an institution that children can visit at will. It is a residential complex with a kitchen and a dormitory that is enclosed on three sides, with a little room for boarders to store their belongings. "These children are not street children. Their needs are different. Earlier they slept at their workplaces and had little time to themselves. We have now enforced the eight-hour workday and we also keep tabs to ensure that