

# 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

AS the situation in Kosovo deteriorates into mayhem and destruction, generating more and more refugees, no country in the world beyond Yugoslavia is more touched by the conflict 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 at 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.

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.

It is located in former factory, transformed in 5,000 hours of arduous work by an army of 120 Kosovar volunteers directed by a Swiss architect.

On any evening, in the great common room, 300 Kosovars gather to hear the evening news in Albanian, brought in by cable from the Albanian news

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

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 sophisticated cities.

One member of the electronics programme began bringing his wife to the French courses organised around the programme. Several weeks later, the couple turned up with their two-year-old child, having learned that day care was available. For the wife, this is a major contact with the world outside her tiny lodging and small circle of refugee friends.

The academic courses reach out to the young. Since the Serbian government dismantled the Albanian-language education system in Kosovo schooling here has suffered badly.

Compulsory schooling in Switzerland ends at 15, so most Kosovars, who would profit from the framework of a school environment are excluded. Their lack of language ability keeps them out of the post-compulsory programmes open to the Swiss.

In spite of this, a small but impressive contingent has made it through the French exams for non-French-speaking students and into the University of Geneva.

A current UPA project is a campaign to persuade the Swiss federal authorities to let refugees live with members of their families already resident in Switzerland instead of packing them off arbitrarily to centres where they know nobody and often laps into depression.

The authorities seem to have as a rule of thumb that nothing must be allowed that might enable refugees to feel at home in Switzerland (and thus suggest to them that they might be welcome).

Nonetheless, the campaign has attracted the support of many prominent people, including some Geneva politicians. Although any easing up of refugee policy is likely to be opposed by the majority of Alemannics, the UPA success augurs well for those who continue to believe in the humanitarian vocation of their country.

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



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 refugee shelters, 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.

Beyond the practical programmes, language courses are given in French, English, Albanian, Italian and Arabic, plus

## 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**.

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. Krithivasan, according to priority to the projects and ensuring that there were no delays. The Villupuram-Thiruvananthapuram 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-Thiruvallur-Thiruchendur and the Cuddalore-Vridhachalam-Salem gauge conversion projects are next on line.

The Southern Railway is hoping that the Tamil Nadu Government will share the cost of the Cuddalore-Vridhachalam-Salem project to give it a push. While the Cuddalore port is being developed, a refinery and a few petrochemical units, apart from a large power plant, are coming up in the area. All this means a rapid growth in the movement of cargo to and from the Cuddalore region.

At present, there is no proposal with the Railways to take up this project and hence, a carrot in the form of the State Government sharing the cost will help push the proposal through with the Ministry. As far as Karnataka is concerned, the biggest project is the Has-

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, 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 it, 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

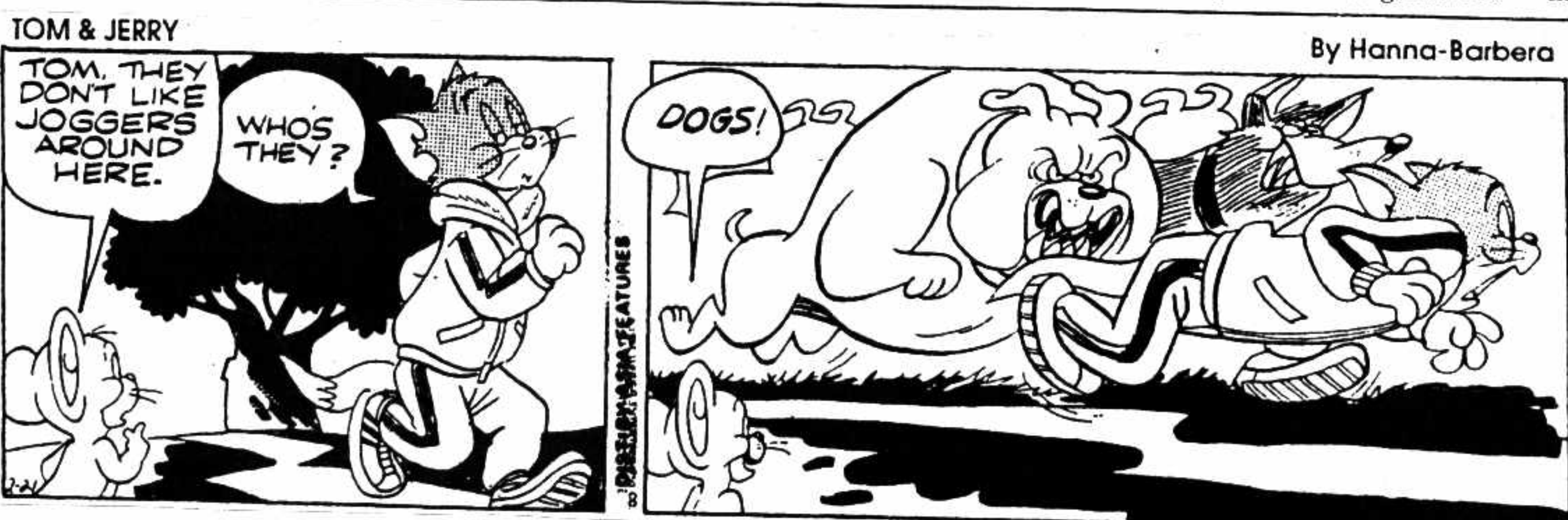
about 15 rakes so far for Hyundai Motors India Ltd to move its cars to New Delhi and Mumbai in 4-5 days. After Ford India Ltd begins production at its Maraimalai Nagar (near Chennai) plant, the Southern Railway hopes it will move more cars than now.

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. Krithivasan.

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 expenses 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

By Hanna-Barbera



## 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.*

HOW 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 footsteps 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 ready 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 partnership, and the fruits of the labour are separate, subsequent issues.

Question: Engaged, married, honeymooning, or settled down 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 in consistently, 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 line ups. 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 are 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. There is no time to lose, because others are eyeing Bangladesh, may be for different objectives. Our foreign policy has to show some degree of independence and resolution.

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## 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. Tishwar, who started working at a roadside eatery at the age of 10, is today caretaker at Kilkari.*

FOR 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 a punishing 12 hours of work for a pittance of Rs 250-400 (\$6-9.5) 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', a 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 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 backbreaking labour that has been thrust upon them," M K Januar, 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 asking 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 room for boarders to store their belongings. "These children are not street children. Their needs are different. Earlier they slept at their work-places and had little time to themselves. We have now enforced the eight-hour workday and we also keep tabs to ensure that they are not ill-treated by their employers," asserts Januar.

However, Kilkari has opened up several possibilities for these children who have been left to fend for themselves. Tishwar, who started working at a roadside eatery at the age of 10, is today caretaker at Kilkari. Two years ago he started a tea stall along with two other resident children and the joint venture is now fairly well established. "We share the work and the profits," says Tishwar with obvious pride. He is the only Kilkari inhabitant with a bank account to his name.

Recently, the television set provided by the administration broke down and the possibilities of its repair were nowhere in sight. So the children dipped into their kitties and collectively bought a brand new set for Rs 1,800 (\$42) — a tall declaration of independence by small children.

— IANS/WFS

## Dam in Protest

GREENPEACE activists have built a dam on the Kishon river in Israel to block toxic effluents from flowing into the Mediterranean Sea. These effluents are mainly discharged by heavy petrochemical industries located along the Kishon river. The river has been virtually turned into an industry waste canal. A study conducted by the National Oceanographic Institute also confirms that the effluents contain toxic heavy metals, untreated municipal sewage and organic contaminants like organohalogenes.

In order to prevent floods,

the riverbed is being regularly dredged and mud is being stored in open pools along the river. Greenpeace analysed the samples taken from the pool. It found that the mud had high levels of zinc, copper, chromium, cadmium and mercury.

"For too long, the industries ignored the marine environment and the health of the local population. The river is dead. We do not want the Mediterranean Sea to suffer a similar fate," said Ofer Ben Dov, Greenpeace Mediterranean campaigner in Israel.

CSE/Down To Earth Features

