

YUGOSLAVIA-REFUGEES: SERBIA GETS TOUGH WITH OWN REFUGEES

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Body

While Western Europe decides when and how to return refugees to the Balkans, back in what is left of Yugoslavia itself, the Serb government is as keen to rid itself of some 400,000 Bosnian and Croat refugees of its own.

After three years of war and the disintegration of the former Yugoslavia, a Serbian government commission has been set up to revise the status of some of the refugees -- 60 percent of whom come from Bosnia and the remainder from Croatia.

According to commission estimates, some 100,000 refugees will lose their refugee status -- along with the right to free health care, social security and other aid. It also appears the government aims to repatriate those who came from areas now considered safe.

Officially, the government commission says the purpose of the current exercise is just to check who is in need of help and who cannot return to their place of origin.

"No one will be expelled from Serbia," says Sava Ivanic, an official of the Serbian Commission for Refugees. "It is necessary to revise the status of some refugees because many have found work and housing in Serbia or have married here."

Ivanic, however, says that refugees from areas in Bosnia-Herzegovina or Croatia now considered safe will lose their privileges. In effect, this means that social security payments and humanitarian aid will stop, thereby forcing many to return home.

This could force an exodus of refugees to already unstable areas like the disputed Serb-held Croatian Krajina area and disputed Serb-held territories in north and east Bosnia-Herzegovina. The commission plans to finish its refugee revision process by June.

Ivanic says that refugees from areas now considered safe can stay if they are undergoing medical treatment in Serbia, have children in school this year, have found work or have purchased homes or started their own business will be allowed to stay but will have their refugee status revoked.

Officials of the Commission say that a revision is necessary due to the economic hardship facing Serbia proper.

"The law granting certain privileges to refugees was adopted long ago, even before war broke out in Bosnia, and well before the international sanctions against Serbia were introduced," says Slobodan Popovic, the deputy commissioner for refugees.

"When sanctions were levied, the economic situation began to worsen and humanitarian aid and free health care have become difficult to supply," he said.

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While official statistics state that there are 405,000 registered refugees in Serbia, sources close to the government say that a further some 100,000 people are living as refugees but have never registered.

They say that 95 percent of the refugees in Serbia proper are staying with friends or relatives. Only some five percent of the total refugee total are living in the 260 former holiday homes, hotels and hostels that have been converted into government-run refugee centers.

The refugee total includes about 1,200 orphaned children and some 50,000 very elderly men and women.

Belgrade, the Serbian capital, has attracted the largest number of refugees. There are currently some 150,000 living in the city which has a population of two million. Their presence has provoked deep division among Belgrade inhabitants. The refugees are easily recognized by their Bosnian muslim and Croat accents and face the scorn and hatred of many Belgradians.

"I didn't know how many Serbs lived in Bosnia until this war," says Ivan M. an elderly Belgrade resident. "They irritate us with their bearish manners."

He shares the anger of many people in Serbia proper who complain that refugees are given priority in obtaining jobs or enrolling their children in good schools.

"They expect us to feel sorry for them and then they want to show off to us with their flashy new cars, with the apartments they have bought in central Belgrade and with their hard currency deposits," says Zvezdana I., a Belgrade clerk says.

Jelena Vlajkovic and a group of therapists who have established a telephone help line for refugees, however, say that most of the refugees are not successful and face immense hardship.

"Only a small number of refugees have found a better life here. Most of them are suffering. They feel used, manipulated and aimless." says Vlajkovic.

"We must remember that none of these people came to Serbia of their own choice. They were forced to leave their homes and usually have nothing to begin with again. The prevailing feelings they express are anger and despair. They don't know what to do next," she says.

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