

REFUGEES

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Sierra Leone: Back from the brink?



UNHCR
United Nations
High Commissioner
for Refugees

The debate gathers momentum

When U.N. Secretary-General Kofi Annan in late 1999 urged member states to join a bold new crusade to help millions of civilians caught in an unending series of wars by subordinating the very basis of their power—sovereignty and the sanctity of national borders—to the greater good of humanitarian action, he touched off what promises to be one of the most important and controversial debates of the new millennium.

Many of these victims, people who have managed to escape the chaos of their immediate surroundings and

he asked in the Security Council. “Two-thirds of the homeless people in the world are classified with the odious acronym of ‘internally displaced persons (IDPs)’” the legal term used to describe civilians uprooted in their own countries, “but they’re really refugees.”

He said that the definition of the term ‘refugee’ was outdated and should now include the estimated 20-25 million IDPs worldwide. The mandate of UNHCR, which already cares for an estimated 21.5 million refugees and other groups, should be expanded to include the internally displaced, he said.

Roberta Cohen, a refugee expert at the Washington-based Brookings Institution, said the situation sharply differentiating the two groups had become ‘absurd’ and that today “we have to have a system that addresses the needs of people on both sides of the border” but she questioned whether UNHCR should be the organization tasked with the problem.

High Commissioner Sadako Ogata has voiced similar concerns. At a time when major donor governments are trimming their lending to such organizations as UNHCR and emphasizing direct aid to crisis areas, who would fund a greatly expanded UNHCR mandate? Too, would the organization be able to help both refugees and IDPs on each side of a border without compromising its original mandate – ending up helping neither group effectively?

Even those issues, however, may appear easy to solve compared with the fundamental dilemma. Helping the internally displaced requires the consent of governments which may be battling for their very survival in civil war type situations. Judging by the opening salvos in this debate few capitals in the regions where unrest is most prevalent appear willing to compromise their power.

The debate seems set to continue for years to come.



The bulk of Somalia's population, like this family, has been uprooted by years of war.

reach a neighboring country where they are classed as refugees, are already entitled to international legal assistance under the 1951 Refugee Convention. At the core of Mr. Annan's appeal was the fate of between 20-25 million additional civilians who remain in their own countries and whose safety and well being is often far more precarious.

Predictably, perhaps, the world community has already split into two broad groups. Western and industrialized nations widely support the concept that the U.N. should, on occasion, involve itself in the internal affairs of nations to help hapless civilian victims of war. Nations such as China and third world countries argue that sovereignty and non-interference in internal affairs drive international relations and not humanitarian issues (see *REFUGEES magazine*, N° 117, *The hot issue for a new millennium*).

Richard Holbrooke, U.S. Ambassador to the world body, recently joined the public debate. “What is a refugee?”



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Cover: Sierra Leonean refugees await a food distribution in neighboring Guinea.
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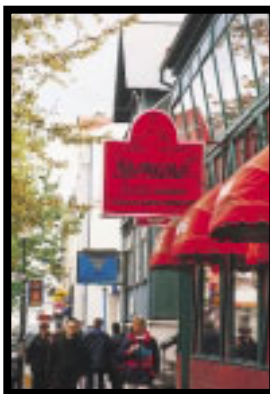
CORRECTION: IN REFUGEES ISSUE 117 THE PHOTO CREDIT ON PAGE 24 SHOULD HAVE BEEN UNHCR / B. NEELEMAN.

UNHCR / B. NEELEMAN



4 A drawing by Sierra Leonean refugee children in Guinea vividly illustrates the chaos which has gripped their country for a decade. A recent peace agreement has brought renewed, if fragile, hope for the country.

UNHCR / R. WILKINSON



21 Iceland is an unlikely destination for refugees. But some recent arrivals are helping to change many of the island's habits, including its cuisine.

UNHCR / H.J. DAVIES



26 An independent evaluation assesses UNHCR's performance during the Kosovo emergency. It underlined several major weaknesses but added that many important factors were beyond the agency's control.

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WE WILL FORGIVE... WE WILL NEVER FORGET

Sierra Leone tries to put a brutal war behind it and build a lasting peace

By Ray Wilkinson

The very name of the place, Casablanca Field, is redolent with the same sense of romance and intrigue inspired by the Hollywood classic movie, Casablanca. In the near distance palm trees sway gently in an onshore breeze and a gentle swell from the Atlantic Ocean laps the beach. A ramshackle village, alive with all the noise, cooking smells and bustle of any African township, spreads higgledy-piggledy across the flank of a softly sloping hill.

Turn to page 6 ►



War amputees at a special camp in the Sierra Leone capital, Freetown.



Market women, members of a powerful civic action group, meet in Freetown to discuss local events and peace prospects.

► A visitor, already warned about the tragedy of the township, is nevertheless beguiled at first by the splash of color, the very liveliness and the apparent normalcy of the place. Then, as one local gives directions to a passer-by, he gesticulates animatedly with what is left of the stump of his right arm. A smiling girl, perhaps six years old, gaily hops by on crutches and waves. In the shade of a nearby hut, a barber expertly cuts the hair of a customer, one-handed. Shockingly, reality intrudes and is overwhelming.

This is a center for some of the victims of one of the most vicious wars of modern times, the nearly decade-old civil conflict in the west African nation of Sierra Leone. Virtually all of the country's 4.4 million people were forced to flee their homes at one time or another, seeking safety in the surrounding bush or trekking to neighboring states, especially Guinea



A hopeful sign for the future in downtown Freetown.

and Liberia, to become refugees. Tens of thousands of persons were killed and wounded, unknown numbers of women and girls were raped, entire villages were razed and their occupants kidnapped in a conflict rooted in ethnic and regional rivalries and an ugly scramble for the country's rich gold and diamond deposits.

But just as Bosnia will forever be associated with "ethnic cleansing" and Rwanda with genocide of the Tutsis, the struggle in Sierra Leone is symbolized by the fate of one particular group of victims—the thousands of innocent civilians whose arms and legs were hacked off indiscriminately by rebel soldiers whose sole aim appeared to be to spread terror among the population and intimidate the government.

More than 1,800 of these amputees and their families live in the officially named Amputee and War Wounded Camp at Casablanca, which is situated in a suburb of the capital, Freetown. Two-year-old Memuna is the youngest victim here. Her mother and father were killed during a 1998 invasion of the city. Her right arm was amputated after it was shot away by a gunshot wound. On the verandah of one house a group of men, all with a single arm, is learning how to become barbers. A small factory, the only one of its kind in Sierra Leone, turns out



artificial limbs for the victims. There is a waiting list of at least 2,000.

A DOUBLE AMPUTEE

Twenty-eight-year-old Abdul Sankoh is the headmaster of the camp school and one of its most tragic victims. When rebels invaded and almost captured Freetown in January, 1999, Sankoh—no relation to guerrilla chieftain Foday Sankoh—fled into the bush. He was seized several days later as he foraged for mangoes and although he offered to act as a porter carrying food, he was recognized by one gunman and denounced as a teacher and traitor.

The guerrillas burned down his village and Sankoh's accuser seized an ax from the victim's own home, forced him to the ground and slashed off his right hand. The rebel then amputated his left hand before cutting him around the mouth and slicing off part of his ear as he lay unconscious. "Go to the president (Kabbah)," the rebels

taunted, as they did to many other war victims. "He will give you your arms back."

As he tried to make his way to safety, the heavily bleeding Sankoh was shot at and almost killed by friendly troops belonging to the West African military force ECOMOG which was fighting the insurgents on behalf of the civilian government and surrounding countries. He eventually walked into Freetown with his wife and two children and helped establish the school for hundreds of youngsters at the amputee center.

It is not only the horrors of the past, however, which continue to haunt the schoolteacher, but a dread of the future. After slowly describing his physical destruction at the hands of the rebels, perhaps even more painfully he told a visitor, "I cannot even go to the toilet on my own or clothe myself. My wife is a young woman. I expect her to leave me. What is her future with me? I am a freak."

And what of the chances of co-existing with the young men who unleashed such a reign of terror on the country if the peace

process does hold? "We only say we will forgive them," the embittered teacher said. "But when they are disarmed there will be no forgiveness. There will only be revenge. There will be revenge."

Surprisingly, given the scale of brutality during years of war, Sankoh's warning was a rare call for revenge, at least publicly, among scores of persons interviewed recently by REFUGEES inside Sierra Leone itself and among the 470,000 Sierra Leonean refugees in neighboring Guinea and Liberia.

FORGIVE BUT DON'T FORGET

"We cannot forget what has happened," said Sundifu Mustafa in Guinea's Forecariah camp. "But for the sake of peace we will forgive. Just give us peace."

Zainab Bangura, the chairperson of a group called The Campaign for Good Governance, an umbrella organization embracing trade unions, churches, civil associations and other groupings said, "This is a process born not of love, but of necessity. We

have to try to bury the horror, and forgive and move on. Though of course we will never forget."

Bangura's group has been influential in rescuing Sierra Leone from the abyss of perpetual war which began in 1991 when former army corporal Foday Sankoh and his Revolutionary United Front (RUF) took up arms against then civilian President Joseph Momoh, articulating years of repression of the majority of the country's civilians. Momoh was ousted in a 1992 military coup, but the country returned to civilian rule when lawyer Ahmad Tejan Kabbah was elected president in multi-party elections in 1996 and signed a peace accord with Sankoh's rebels.

Sierra Leone continued to see-saw between war and peace, civilian rule and military repression. The following year army major Johnny Koroma toppled Kabbah and Sankoh joined a ruling military junta. The U.N. and neighboring

states successfully isolated the regime internationally. Internally, Bangura's fledgling organization launched a cam-

Tens of thousands of persons were killed and wounded, women and girls were raped, entire villages were razed and their occupants kidnapped.

Main refugee locations and refugee return areas in west Africa.





UNHCR / C. SHIRLEY

Displaced people live amidst the destruction in Freetown.

► paign of civil resistance and virtually shut down the country for 10 months until Nigerian-led ECOMOG troops drove the junta out of Freetown and reinstated Kabbah in March, 1998.

The civilians flexed their muscles again during 1999 peace talks in the Togo capital of Lome. When they felt Kabbah, Sankoh

and Koroma were ignoring their concerns, they brought Sierra Leone to another standstill for 24 hours. Both sides got the message. "People say we don't have guns and so we don't have power," Bangura said in an interview. "We have power. We have people power."

Prodded by the civilians at home and

by an international community which only now had begun to focus on the scale of atrocities being committed, the warring factions signed an agreement on July 7, 1999, forming a coalition government. They agreed to disarm rebel soldiers, reintegrate them into society and bring hundreds of thousands of refugees home.

To escape, he ripped his own wounded arm off...

Alie K. a tailor and father of seven children, was captured by rebels when they attacked his village of Serekolia in May, 1998. The insurgents burned all the village homes down before chaining Alie to a boy from a neighboring village and leading them into the bush. After going only a short distance the guerrillas decided to amputate his left hand. "Three of them did it, one pointing a gun, the others cut-

ting," Alie remembers.

They placed his hand on top of a tree stump and slashed it four times until it was left hanging by slivers of skin and tissue. The rebels, who were led by a young commander with the nickname 'Moskito' also slashed his right hand one time before whipping him and a friend and chasing them away from their compound.

Like many similar atrocities commit-

ted in Sierra Leone, the rebels gave no reason for mutilating the villager, but they did hand him a letter for Nigerian troops backing the civilian government, presumably giving their reasons for fighting.

As he crashed through the bush, Alie's wounds continued to bleed. There were no bandages available. Eventually, he said, he ripped the remnants of his own left hand away and threw it into the bush, because he "could not hold it together while running." He eventually linked up with his family and walked to neighboring Guinea to seek sanctuary, his wound still unattended until he reached a local hospital. ■

WORKING FOR A BREAKTHROUGH

Ugandan diplomat Francis Okelo spent two years as the special representative of the U.N. Secretary-General in trying to secure a breakthrough, before leaving the post at the end of 1999.

He described the peace process: "I began work with a staff of two, a secretary and a political officer. I set myself three objectives: to help remove the junta which was then in power; to end hostilities; and to help re-establish constitutional rule and a permanent peace structure."

For much of his shuttle diplomacy, Okelo felt totally isolated, a seemingly invisible presence amid the ongoing carnage. Even when Kabbah returned to power, the Ugandan's mission remained precarious.

"At one point there was an illusion that the rebels had been defeated," he recalled. "It was a phoney calm however." When he raised the possibility that the war could not be won militarily and negotiations were the only solution, he became a virtual pariah.

Strangely, the turning point came during the rebel invasion of Freetown in early 1999. "We saw the problem coming a mile away," the diplomat said. "It was obvious then there had to be a dialogue, but I could have been lynched in the streets for advocating a cease-fire at the time."

Eventually, talks did get underway in Lome. "The people had become totally traumatized," Okelo said. "The only way out of the quagmire was to get out of it, whatever the cost. Perhaps peace could be obtained through the exhaustion of both sides.

"That is why the government accepted the rebels in a coalition government and why it granted a blanket amnesty to the fighters," he said. "Amnesty was not a choice. It was a necessity. Striking a deal with the devil was the price that had to be paid."

But, added the departing envoy, "The parties in Sierra Leone have put down the deposit. Don't lose the sale."

The amnesty was possibly the most controversial part of the peace deal and has been widely denounced by humanitarian organizations. Officials who helped negotiate it, however, insisted, like Okelo, that it was the only deal on the table. "Justice has not been perverted, it has been delayed," insisted one high-ranking African official. "Without that blanket amnesty, the rebels would not

SIERRA LEONE AT A GLANCE**1787**

Local chiefs sell a sliver of land to British refugees. This is later used to settle freed African slaves and the largest settlement is called Freetown.

April 27, 1961

Sierra Leone, an area covering nearly 72,000 square kilometers (27,699 square miles) bordering on the Atlantic Ocean, Guinea to the north and east and Liberia to the southeast, wins independence from Britain. Freetown becomes its capital.

1978

President Siaka Stevens makes the country a one-party state. He quit in 1985, aged 80 and handed former army chief of staff Joseph Momoh a sparsely populated country (4.4 million people at the start of the new millennium) rich in diamonds, gold, iron ore and bauxite.

March 23, 1991

Former army corporal Foday Sankoh and his Revolutionary United Front take up arms against President Joseph Momoh, beginning a decade-long civil conflict in which more than 10,000 persons were killed, tens of thousands were deliberately mutilated and half the population were forced to flee their homes.

April 29, 1992

Army captain Valentine Strasser ousts President Momoh in a military coup sparked by frustration with the war.

January 16, 1996

In turn, Strasser is ousted by his deputy Julius Maada Bio who promises multi-party elections and civilian rule. Ahmad Tejan Kabbah wins the March 15 elections and signs a peace deal in November of that year with Sankoh's rebels.

1997

The peace deal quickly unravels. Sankoh is put

under house arrest during a visit to Nigeria but Major Johnny Paul Koroma leads an army revolt against President Kabbah. Sankoh rallies to the coup but the United Nations slaps a fuel, arms and travel ban on the newly installed military junta.

1998

Nigerian-led ECOMOG troops drive the junta and rebels from Freetown and reinstate Kabbah in March, the first time in Africa that neighboring states have restored a civilian leader after a coup. Sankoh is extradited from Nigeria to Freetown where he is convicted of treason and sentenced to death. A reign of terror continues throughout the country, including an orchestrated rebel campaign to sever the limbs of civilian victims.

1999

Junta loyalists and rebel allies almost take Freetown in an attack during which an estimated 5,000 people die, but peace talks eventually get underway later in the year.

July 7, 1999

After earlier signing a cease-fire agreement in May, a peace accord is reached in Lome, the capital of Togo, in which the rebels obtain four cabinet seats in a national unity government in return for laying down their arms.

Late 1999-2000

Disarmament continues, but only slowly. Many rebels remain in the countryside and attacks and harassment against civilians continue. Sierra Leonean refugees in surrounding countries express their desire to return home—but only after all combatants are disarmed. Contingency plans are drawn up by agencies such as UNHCR to help hundreds of thousands of people return to their homes—but large scale movements depend on the success of the disarmament and reintegration process.

have stopped shooting and we could not have started the peace process."

"We have to move on," said Zainab Bangura, but at some point in the near future

"we must also explore what happened and why. Until we go back and get the answers, reconciliation will never be complete."

Freetown is contemplating the establishment of a Truth and Reconciliation Commission similar to one in South Africa which explored the misdeeds of that country's apartheid era.

One of the most gruesome questions such a body would have to explore is the genesis of the mutilation ▶

Sierra Leone is symbolized by the thousands of innocent civilians whose arms and legs were hacked off indiscriminately by the rebels.



Former child soldiers learn car repair as part of their rehabilitation into civil society.

► campaign, the systematic severing of limbs and the gruesome vocabulary which accompanied the atrocities. Victims were often offered the macabre choice of ‘short sleeves’ or ‘long sleeves’ –being cut above or below the elbow. The guerrillas named their campaign, somewhat incongruously but ominously ‘No Living Thing.’ Young inductees were sometimes initiated by being forced to kill their own parents and mutilate neighbors.

Under whatever code name the rebels operated, one thing is already clear—it was a systematic and well-organized campaign of terror. Some commentators suggested ritual mutilation was rooted in local history, but African journalist Thomas Kamara insisted, “Such a campaign is un-

precedented in Africa. I know of no historical links between what has just happened and anything that has preceded it.”

Zainab Bangura believes the rebels “are still underestimating the level of atrocities they committed and their impact on the country.” She is equally emphatic that while the fate of the amputees was terrible, the women of Sierra Leone probably suffered even more.

“The agony of the amputees is the visible sign of suffering in Sierra Leone,” she said. “The invisible atrocity is the one which was organized against the women of this country. It was a well-organized campaign to subdue the women of this country by abducting women and young girls, raping and gang raping them and

turning some into killing machines. We must never overlook this silent suffering on the day of reckoning.”

ANOTHER CHANCE

In downtown Freetown, under a magnificent centuries-old cotton tree which dwarfs everything around it is a sign: “Sierra Leoneans, love one another as God loves You.” It is the country’s symbolic hope for the future. And despite the barbarities of the recent past, Sierra Leone has been given another chance.

After ignoring the war for so long, the U.N. late last year began dispatching Indian and Kenyan military units which will form part of a 11,000 strong international force to bolster the peace process.



UNHCR / C. SHIRLEY

—including robbery and rape— still widespread.

Short term, the key to prolonging the peace effort was the disarmament of thousands of fighters, but that continued fitfully. At the time this article went to press, several thousand fighters had emerged from the bush and surrendered their weapons, but many others remained at large and some 'field commanders' were vowing to continue the war.

Some rebels said they had not been paid an agreed bonus for surrendering their arms. Many others apparently feared retribution once they had surrendered and had no means to defend themselves.

U.N. Secretary-General Kofi Annan recognized the fragility of the peace accord, and in early 2000 asked that the U.N. force be increased from 6,000 to 11,100 men including 12 infantry battalions and support units. The Security Council in February approved the expansion.

But even if disarmament is successful an even more difficult, long-term problem must be

tackled; the successful reintegration of not only huge numbers of refugees, but also the guerrillas.

Hundreds of thousands of refugees and civilians displaced within Sierra Leone have all indicated that once disarmament is complete they will go home as quickly as possible and as one of the poorest countries in the world, Freetown will certainly need them. "These refugees will be coming back with a lot of skills they will have learned, even in the camps," said Zainab Bangura. "They want to come home and the country desperately needs them."

The future of the guerrillas is another matter. The international community in the past has devoted limited funds and a short time span to obscure conflicts like ►

Branded a rebel

Sahr ran afoul of former junta soldiers when he made the brash decision to return to his hometown in Sierra Leone from Guinea where he had sought sanctuary as a refugee. A group of rebels captured the 29-year-old miner as he was sheltering in the bush. A friend who was captured at the same time was immediately placed in front of a firing squad. "Father, do not kill me," he implored. "I am not your father," one soldier said, and the rebels shot him down.

Sahr was one of nine civilians who were rounded up at the same time and their fate was hotly debated among the gunmen. "If we don't kill them ourselves we should mark them so the Kamajors (a local pro-government militia) or the Guinean soldiers will kill them," one rebel said. The kidnapped civilians were tied down so they could not resist and each were deeply cut with razors with the rebel initials RUF (Revolutionary United Front). Their heads were then roughly shaved in a crude cross and they were again beaten with machetes.

When a second group of eight civilians were captured later the same day they, too, had their chests, backs and foreheads cut with the same RUF initials and that of a second group, AFRC. When one man escaped, two other men were shot in retaliation. Another escapee inadvertently wandered back into the rebel camp and was gunned down on the spot.

The Sierra Leonean miner eventually escaped and made his way back to Guinea, but his troubles were far from over. Much as the rebels had predicted, when he was stopped by one group of vigilantes they mistook him for a guerrilla. He was flogged with a buckle belt and kicked all night until he was able to make his way back to a refugee camp. ■

The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) reopened its Freetown office. Shortly after the Lome peace agreement was signed, regional UNHCR officials met and drew up contingency plans which anticipated that perhaps as many as 170,000 refugees from Guinea, Liberia and Gambia would return by the end of the year 2000 as peace took hold. UNHCR field offices would then be opened in Sierra Leone to assist the repatriation and reintegration of the refugees.

The planning was essential to anticipate a 'best case scenario' but proved to be overly optimistic.

Inside the country, many areas remained no-go zones for humanitarian agencies such as UNHCR with 'banditry'



UNHCR / C. SHIRLEY

Learning skills in Bo town ready for the peace.

► Sierra Leone. Because of those parameters, problems such as ‘reintegration’ had to fit into a convenient but implausible time slot.

But as Bosnia and Rwanda proved only recently, healing the mental wounds of war takes far longer than rebuilding the physical scars. Sierra Leone will be no different.

CHILD KILLER

Father Joseph Berton has lived in Sierra Leone for 30 years. He narrowly escaped with his own life early last year when he

was captured for 20 days during which time four sisters were killed by guerrillas. He now runs a center for around 160 children –both the victims of the war and some child killers– in an idyllic former holiday resort on the coast just outside Freetown.

On one bungalow housing the children is scrawled the ominous message ‘This house is covered by the blood of years.’ A 15-year-old youth nicknamed “Killer Captain” glares morosely at a visitor saying

nothing. He has admitted being a rebel and killing an unknown number of people and when he first arrived was violent, aggressive and withdrawn.

A 16-year-old girl who was abducted when she was seven, admits that “I used a gun” but refuses to say anything further.

“To look at them now, I wouldn’t call them children anymore” says Father Berton who added that some of his charges occasionally leave the center to go back to their home villages –if they still remem-

Murder... and then rape

When rebel gunmen seized part of the capital of Freetown during a 1999 assault, the Conteh family was caught in the middle of the fighting and captured. As the attackers terrorized the family’s mother, her husband begged them to release her, only to be shot dead on the spot. A hysterical wife burst into tears during the ruthless execution and the gunmen killed her, too.

Two sons and a teenage daughter, Miss A., were forced to accompany the rebels as they were pushed out of town, being employed as porters to carry the rebels’ loot. When one brother collapsed, exhausted, he was executed as he lay on the ground. His younger sibling was gunned down as he tried to escape to a neighbor’s home.

Miss A.’s ordeal continued. Between January and March, 1999, she was repeatedly gang raped by thugs she could only identify as ‘Pr’ ‘05’ ‘55’ and ‘Daramy.’ She saw other women routinely gang raped during her captivity. She was later released during an exchange of rebel prisoners and civilians and eventually reached Guinea.

Because of the severity of her experiences, at the time of REFUGEES going to press, Miss A. had not even been able to begin a psychological healing process. ■

ber where that is— but often return, unable to face their fellow villagers.

But perhaps because of the long time he has spent in difficult situations, Father Berton remains optimistic about the long-term future of Sierra Leone. “I’m telling you, these kids were made by God with shock absorbers thick enough for the toughest four wheel drive,” he says in a colorful metaphor. “They can take it and they can recover. But rehabilitation cannot be done overnight. Look how long it took Europe to become ‘civilized.’”

In the upcountry Kpayama center, 17 former child soldiers are receiving basic education and other lessons before being reunited with their families. The majority have killed civilians and become drug addicts. They are supposed to stay six weeks, but some stay one year. It will take much longer even than that for them to stand a chance of becoming totally rehabilitated.

Fifteen-year-old Jonathan was captured eight years earlier when rebels attacked his village and killed his mother and father.

“They gave me guerrilla training. They gave me a gun,” he says in a monotone. “Did you take drugs?” “Yes.” “Did you kill civilians?” “Lots.” “Do you think that was wrong?” “It was just war, what I did then. I only took orders. I knew it was bad. It was not my wish.”

“What do you want to do when you finish school here?” “I want to go back into the military. I have the knowledge to go there.”

NEW APPROACHES

Though the war in Sierra Leone may at one time have been viewed in isolation, UNHCR and other humanitarian organizations in recent years have begun to try to tackle such problems on a regional basis.

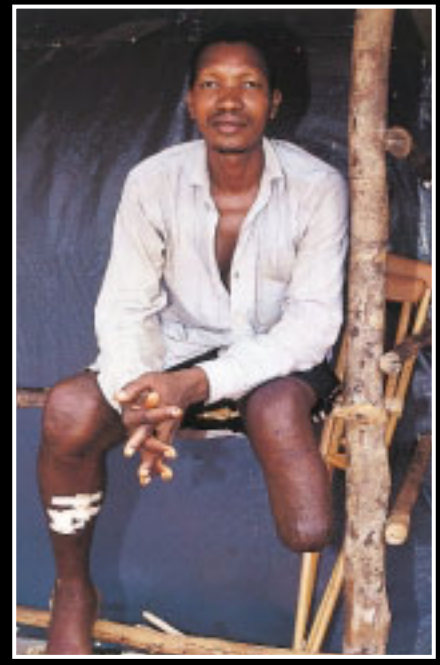
The weapons which fuel the fighting in Sierra Leone are supplied by outside arms suppliers and smuggled in via countries such as Liberia. That state has its own massive refugee problem (In a bizarre situation, even as Sierra Leone was being ripped apart in the 1990s by its own war, an estimated 100,000 Liberian refugees preferred to take their chances there than face another civil war in their own country).

Guinea hosts the largest number of refugees in Africa, a total of 489,000 people mainly from Sierra Leone and Liberia.

Increasingly, Guinea has warned the



Amputee war victims



outside world that it cannot continue to be a benevolent host to so many people and watch its own infrastructure crumble.

UNHCR restructured its field operations in 1998, creating a regional directorate for west and central Africa and mechanisms to allocate manual and financial resources in a more flexible and timely manner throughout the region and to try to eliminate overlap and waste.

It has begun to promote the idea of burden sharing among states, including projects to help refugee host countries such as Guinea and their indigenous populations.

UNHCR, in collaboration with the World Bank and the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) also launched the so-called Brookings Process, named after the Washington-based think tank, the Brookings Institution, to exam- ▶

No Sankoh, no Sierra Leone

As armed guerrillas closed in on his village, chief K. ordered women and children to escape into the bush while 80 men, armed with a motley selection of 17 single shot rifles and few cartridges, tried to defend their homes.

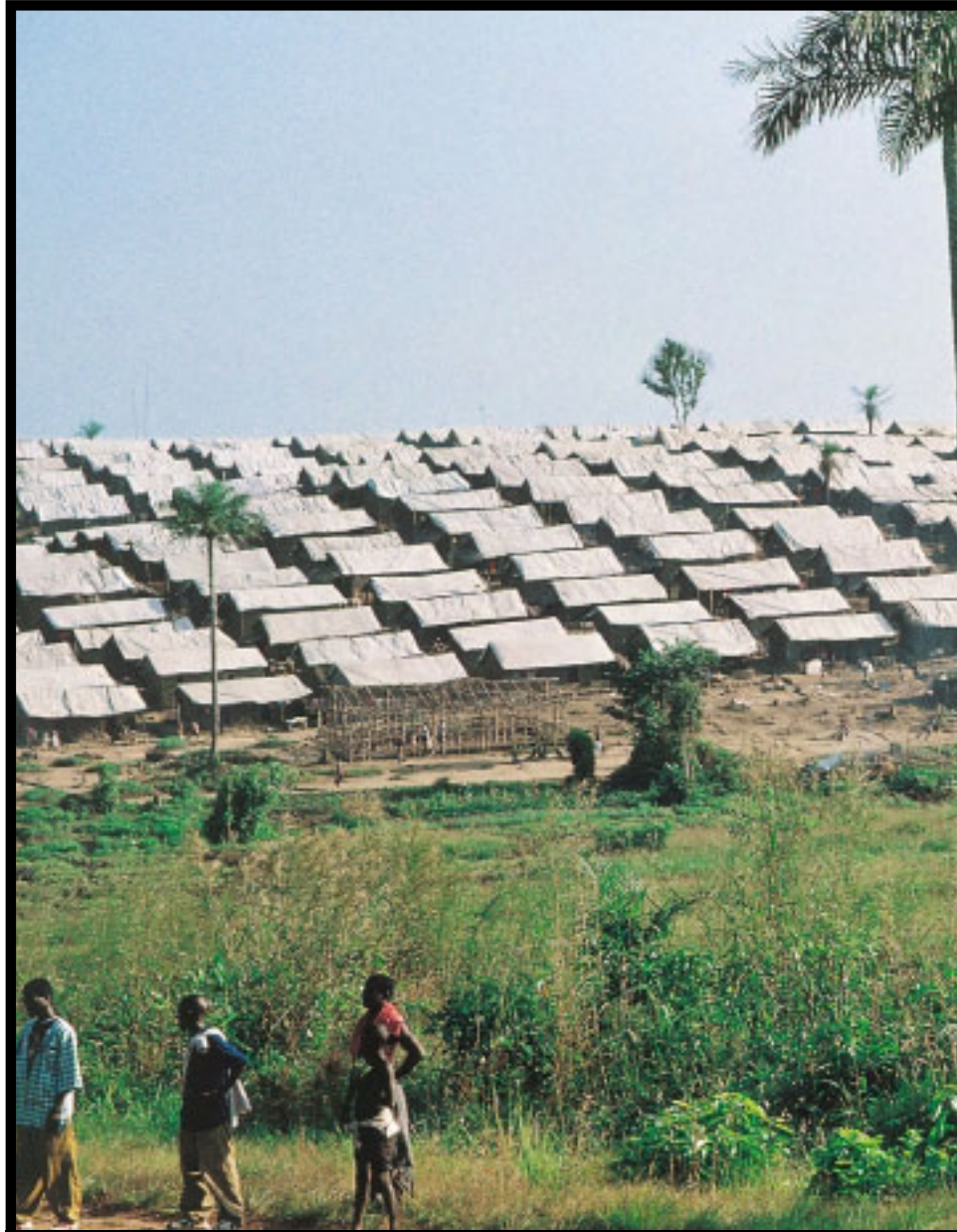
They were no match for the attackers and the area was quickly overrun. Chief K. escaped into the bush and watched as all the buildings except the mosque were burned down. The following morning as he sifted through the debris and discovered the bodies of two villagers, the chief was captured.

The rebels slashed his foot and attached a padlock to his right ear saying, "This is your earring."

Worse was to follow. Though his life was apparently spared because he was the son of a powerful paramount chief, the guerrilla commander decided to amputate his fingers but not kill him, so he could deliver a letter to the authorities warning Sierra Leone's president "No Foday Sankoh (the guerrilla commander), no Sierra Leone."

They also left his thumb, which they said symbolized "One love, One Sierra Leone."

Because the machete was blunt, the rebels had to hack at the victim's hand repeatedly. To make sure the chief reached a friendly village and delivered the rebels warning, the local commander personally took a rope and tied it around the victim's hand as a tourniquet to stop the flow of blood. ■



A camp in the interior of Sierra Leone for thousands of internally displaced persons.

► ine such issues as methods of bridging the gap between emergency humanitarian assistance and long-term development.

The three organizations are also attempting to "raise attention to the regional dimensions of national conflicts in West Africa and facilitate a discussion on whether country-centered response to conflicts generally favored by donors is appropriate."

After one recent fact finding mission to the region, the three agencies said there was still a lot of work to be done in this area and that "the regional effort is not moving as quickly as envisioned." The borders between Guinea and Liberia remained closed, the

report said, political and military alliances were constantly changing and the internal situation in some countries remained "uncertain."

The mission identified other areas of concern including the need to more deeply engage some West African political leaders and former rebels, the need to improve the flow of information between the various groups and also to refugees to allow them to decide when and how they would be willing to return home and to better coordinate the many humanitarian programs already being undertaken to allow greater flexibility and to eliminate duplication.



UNHCR / R. WILKINSON

Take your wounds to the president as a warning

Ms. S. was captured by unknown gunmen in late 1999 in the town of Sumaworia. At first the rebels simply robbed the woman of her bag and then ordered her to stay with them, apparently for sexual reasons. When she argued vehemently and said she would prefer to die rather than to remain, the youngest of the gunmen forced her into a sitting position on the ground.

She was ordered to put her foot on a stump of wood. As the teenage rebel attempted to sever her foot with a machete, she withdrew it quickly. The rebel drew the machete across her throat and warned she would be killed instantly if she did not put her foot down.

She placed her left foot on the wood. The young rebel severed two of her toes. He handed them to her and told her to give them to President Kabbah (of Sierra Leone) with a warning that this is what could happen to people who supported the government.

During the night the rebels abandoned her. People hiding in a hut nearby helped her, washing her foot and putting salt on the wound to stop it bleeding. She was carried in a hammock to a nearby town where a group of hunters looked after her for a month, until she was able to walk to safety. ■

Access to many no-go areas outside Freetown must be secured, mission members said. Involved agencies must consolidate refugee programs and prepare plans for the rapid return of refugees once political conditions warrant. They also suggested the creation of income generating activities for former soliders and micro-credit programs for refugees.

“Time is of the essence,” a mission report said, “and we must implement pro-

“To look at them now, I wouldn’t call them children anymore.”

grams as soon and as quickly as possible, lest the momentum begins to flag and we miss a crucial window of opportunity.”

But whatever programs are put into place, and no matter how many international soldiers are present to enforce the peace, as Zainab Bangura said, “The real test will come when the guns are all finally taken away and the gunmen go back to their communities to face their own kin. We can only hope and pray.” ■

THE WORLD

KOSOVO



UNHCR / H. CAUX

4 When a rocket propelled grenade slammed into a UNHCR-sponsored bus in northern Kosovo on Feb. 2 killing two Serb passengers, the incident ignited the worst inter-ethnic violence in the province since KFOR troops took control of the region. The incident sparked prolonged clashes between Serb and Albanian communities in the northern town of Mitrovica in which at least 11 persons were killed and dozens wounded. The UNHCR bus service, which was begun to try to promote freedom of movement, was one of the casualties of the fighting. Yugoslav President Slobodan Milosevic denounced the U.N. mission in Kosovo, while in the aftermath of the violence United Nations special representative Bernard Kouchner urged the international community to step up its assistance to the beleaguered province.

SIERRA LEONE



UNHCR / C. SHIRLEY

3 Sierra Leone has another chance to establish peace after nearly a decade of appalling civil war symbolized by the brutal mutilation of thousands of civilian victims. A fragile peace agreement between the government and rebels was signed in July, 1999, and members of an 11,100-strong United Nations force have arrived in the west African state. Hundreds of thousands of displaced persons are eager to return home - but only after the majority of former rebels disarm in what, until now, has been a slow and laborious process.

BURUNDI



UNHCR / R. WILKINSON

2 More than 200,000 persons have been killed in a seemingly unending war in the central African state of Burundi. There are at least 330,000 refugees in neighboring Tanzania and hundreds of thousands of persons like those pictured are displaced within the country. Africa's most venerated leader, Nelson Mandela has now assumed

the role of mediator to try to end the conflict. After Mandela tongue lashed the various parties to the war, some progress was reported in ongoing talks and the government agreed to dismantle so-called 'regroupment camps' where it had herded many civilians, but there have been so many false starts in Burundi peace efforts in the past, there was no guarantee Mandela's intervention would end the war.

3

CONGO



UNDP

1 The Security Council has authorized a 5,500-member force to monitor the shaky cease-fire in the Democratic Republic of the Congo. The force will comprise 500 military observers

and 5,000 troops to protect them in a conflict which has drawn in five neighboring African countries and precipitated what some analysts have called Africa's first 'world war.' The resolution was drafted by the United States, whose U.N. ambassador Richard Holbrooke said, "The time has now arrived to act." The war has destabilized the entire region and produced tens of thousands of new refugees.



SERBIA



UNHCR / A. KAZMIERAKIS

5 UNHCR is expanding its operations in Serbia to assist the largest combined refugee and displaced population in Europe.

There are an estimated half million refugees from earlier conflicts in Bosnia-Herzegovina and Croatia in the country and they were joined by more than 200,000 ethnic Serbs and Roma who fled the fighting in the province of Kosovo in recent months. UNHCR has budgeted \$71 million for the year 2000 to help these people and this will include the expansion of integration projects to help

refugees who decide to stay in-country. However, there have been indications in recent months of improved cooperation between regional governments which could result in more longtime refugees like those pictured returning home than in previous years.

6

AFGHANISTAN



UNHCR / A. HOLLMANN

6 When an Afghan airliner hijacked during an internal flight

eventually landed in Britain, the incident raised alarm bells not only in the United Kingdom but throughout major asylum-receiving countries. Authorities believe the hijack was deliberately staged to allow the ringleaders and accompanying families to escape Afghanistan—

where hundreds of thousands of people such as the woman pictured are displaced and an additional 2.6 million are refugees in surrounding countries—and to seek asylum in a friendly country. Now, the authorities worry that 'copy cat' hijackings could take place from other trouble spots.

7

HONG KONG



UNHCR / A. HOLLMANN

7 The Hong Kong government has agreed to allow the last remaining 1,400 Vietnamese boat people

in the territory to settle there permanently. More than 200,000 Vietnamese transitted Hong Kong since 1975, being resettled in third countries or returned to Viet Nam. The last group of Vietnamese could not find a new country to go to and Viet Nam refused to accept them back so as a senior government official said, "The sooner we assimilate these people to make them productive members of the Hong Kong community, the better off we are."

GUESTS IN A FORGOTTEN COUNTRY

Guinea is one of the world's poorest nations but hosts more refugees than any state in Africa

By Corinne Perthuis

When Mensah Kpognon arrived in the town of Macenta near the border between the west African states of Guinea and Liberia in the spring of 1999, his task appeared straightforward enough. As the senior UNHCR official in the area, his orders were to help complete the voluntary repatriation of 120,000 Liberian refugees in the region and then close down his office.

Instead, as fresh unrest broke out in Liberia, the border was closed, the return program came to an abrupt halt and Kpognon found himself dealing with a fresh influx of fleeing Liberians.

Almost immediately “We had to shelter 8,000 new Liberian refugees at the Daro transit camp, which had been established initially for repatriation,” he recalls now. And rather than closing the office, as the new millennium began Kpognon and his staff were transferring these latest refugees 50 kilometers deeper into Guinea and away from the volatile border region.

The abrupt change of direction which the Macenta field staff faced is symptomatic of one of the most challenging and complex refugee problems anywhere in the world.

Guinea sits at the epicenter of one of Africa's most unstable regions. Two neighbors, Sierra Leone and Liberia, have been devastated by war for years and hundreds

of thousands of civilians have spilled over into surrounding countries seeking safety.

Although it is one of the world's poorest countries, Guinea took the bulk of them, and with an estimated 489,000 mainly Sierra Leoneans and Liberians, hosts the largest number of refugees of any state in Africa.

“The presence of (so many) refugees is a heavy burden to bear for this very poor and forgotten country,” says Christine Mougne, UNHCR's deputy Representative in Guinea, who went on to emphasize that the sheer number of refugees involved was only one of many headaches faced by the government in Conakry and by humanitarian organizations such as UNHCR working in the region.

As a dirt poor state hosting so many displaced persons, Conakry is obviously a place deserving international sympathy. But Guinea is not considered a ‘sexy’ operation for many donors and receives comparatively little assistance.

NO ONE WANTS TO KNOW

As Christine Mougne said, “Very few people want to know what goes on here. We have a hard time financing our programs, and we constantly have to adjust our needs downwards.”

The government in Conakry and the country's seven million people have begun to question the presence of so many foreigners, some of whom have been in the country for years. While

Guinea's limited state resources are under massive strain, large regions have been environmentally degraded and the country's very security put at risk by the presence of so many refugees, what little aid is available is channeled to the ‘visitors’ rather than being shared with equally deserving locals, they insist.

It is one of the most challenging and complex refugee problems anywhere in the world.



Refugees make mud bricks to build a school at Forecariah.



UNHCR / R. WILKINSON



UNHCR / B. NEELEMAN
Sierra Leonean refugee women fetch water at a camp near Gueckedou in Guinea.

“It is essential to share assistance to benefit both refugees and the local population,” Interior Minister Zainoul Sanoussi, whose department is responsible for refugee matters, insisted in one recent interview.

The rapidly changing political and military situations in the neighboring refugee producing countries and the complexity of the needs of specific groups, makes long-term humanitarian planning not only extremely challenging, but almost impossible at times.

Explains Christine Mougne: “Right now we are offering special assistance to the victims of mutilations (from Sierra Leone), and to vulnerable women and children. While we have suspended aid to people who arrived more than two years ago, we are receiving new refugees, especially in the west and southeast of the country.”

As the disarmament of former rebels continues in Sierra Leone, the UNHCR office must prepare blueprints for the repatriation of 370,000 refugees to that country, but in the interim must still divert precious funds to relocate vulnerable refugee camps from border areas to safer locations inland.

“Naturally, new displacements weaken refugees who have to start life all over again in a new camp, only to leave again for home a few months later,” she said. “But we have to ensure their security” whatever the additional cost and for however long it takes.

But such is the volatility of the region, even when UNHCR undertakes repatriation programs, as in the case of Mensah Kpognon mentioned above, these projects sometime turn into renewed waves of refugees.

REFUGEE EPICENTER

Guinea, Sierra Leone and Liberia meet near the town of Gueckedou in a region known as “Foresterie Guinea” and in the last decade it has witnessed the ebb and flow of hundreds of thousands of people on the move. A national highway runs parallel to the border for more than 100 kilometers and along its entire length local villages and refugee camps have become interlaced.

Liberian civilians fleeing war in their country were the first to arrive and then the Sierra Leoneans, escaping similar atrocities in the west, followed.

The ‘old refugees’ who fled several years ago are easy to spot. They have had time

The rapidly changing political and military situation makes long-term humanitarian planning not only extremely challenging, but almost impossible at times.



UNHCR / C. SCHURFF

Food supplies for refugees in Guinea's Forecariah region.

to build solid mud houses. Further down the highway new, white tents, house more recent arrivals. Some refugees have become 'urbanized' living in large centers such as Conakry where they take menial jobs.

Though the Sierra Leone government and the country's rebels signed a peace agreement in July, 1999, (see cover story) there is an air of uncertainty among refugees—a reluctance to return home until everyone has been disarmed.

Some refugees employ their time usefully. Seventeen-year-old Redempta es-

caped murderous guerrillas by walking through the forest for one month but in Guinea "I've had the opportunity to continue my studies. In (my home) village, I'm sure I would have had to stay home to help my mother. French classes are mandatory here, and I would like to speak the language well before going back home."

Jim's situation is more painful. While children play volleyball and football, he is in hiding with five other teenage boys in a hut far away from a leisure center at the

Sanadou 3 Camp. Jim is a former child soldier, one of the guerrillas responsible for one of the worst reigns of terror in recent African history.

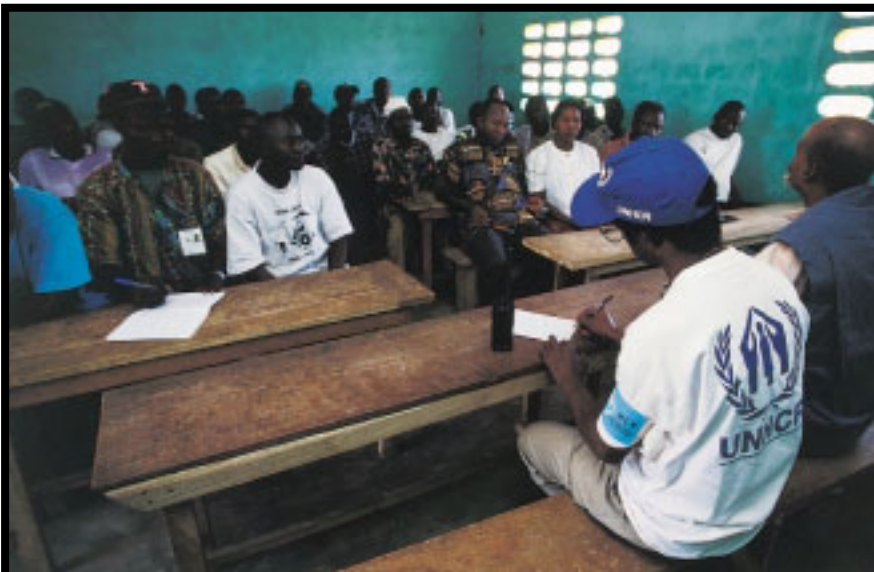
The rebels "made me do bad things, kill the Kamajors, our enemies," he recalled. "If I didn't do it, they would kill me. I saw some of my friends killed. To keep us going, they gave us valium, marijuana or 'gunpowder.'

But friends or relatives of some of Jim's victims could be present in the camp and the boys could literally be lynched if these people recognize them as killers.

"They can suddenly become very violent, or remain prostrate for hours on end," says Michael Ngaojia, who supervises them. We hope to eventually find their families and relations, but most of them do not even remember their mother's face. And so many parents have been killed."

As this article was being written, Liberia agreed to reopen its border with Guinea. That development, plus the peace agreement in Sierra Leone raises hope for the refugees...and for the Guineans who have played host so patiently.

"We welcomed them because they are our brothers and our family," said one senior police official in Gueckedou. "But like all people who are close to us, with whom we have much in common, we want them to be happy. And their happiness means living at home. They have already been here too long." ■



UNHCR / C. SHIRLEY

UNHCR officials and refugees meet at a center near Forecariah, Guinea.

WHERE AM I?

Refugees are finding a most unusual home in a faraway place



A Kosovo couple in front of their new house.

By Ray Wilkinson

When Nguyen Van Ho escaped his native South Viet Nam in 1979 and reached his newly adopted homeland, he was shocked. Staring across a treeless landscape of forbidding lava rocks, volcanoes and glaciers, his first thought was, "I have escaped Viet Nam and gone to the moon."

Two decades later, 37-year-old Zdravko Vranies arrived from the chaos of the Balkans and had a similar reaction. "Is this Mars?" he wondered.

Both refugees had, somewhat reluctantly and to their own surprise, accepted sanctuary in Iceland, a wedge of beautiful but harsh fjords and mountains stuck between northern Europe, Canada and the North Pole. Nguyen Van Ho had never even heard of the country until a visiting delegation to the Malaysian camp in which he was living

asked if he would like to start a new life in Iceland. Vranies had wanted to go to Switzerland or Germany, but when those options were ruled out, he boarded an aircraft with his wife and two daughters and flew to the capital of Reykjavik in June, 1998.

Iceland is one of the most unusual and little known of asylum countries anywhere in the world. The majority of refugees, like Nguyen, have probably never heard of the place and even among humanitarian workers there is often astonishment: "Iceland? Refugees? You must be kidding."

But since the Hungarian Revolution in 1956, it has been welcoming small groups of uprooted peoples. In 1979, 34 boat people who had fled South Viet Nam, including Nguyen Van Ho, arrived to start a new life. A decade later another group of Viet-

namese, this time mainly northerners who had been living in camps in Hong Kong, came.

Iceland accepted Polish refugees during the 1980s as the seemingly monolithic communist bloc in central Europe began to crumble and for three years starting in 1996 groups of mainly mixed marriage Serbs from the Krajina region of Croatia who had been driven out of their homes by the war in 1995, were accepted. In 1999, nearly 80 refugees from Kosovo have been flown to Iceland.

MAJOR IMPACT

Those numbers may seem small, but the population of Iceland is only 275,000 and on a per capita basis, the number of Kosovars accepted this year would be comparable to an annual intake of more than 70,000 refugees in the United States or some 15,000 people in the United Kingdom. The social and cultural impact on both the refugees themselves and the ho-

Iceland is one of the most unusual asylum countries in the world.

UNHCR / R. WILKINSON



A Vietnamese refugee who arrived in 1979 with work colleagues in the Icelandic capital, Reykjavik.

mogeneous Icelanders has also probably been more pronounced than in other countries.

Minister of Social Security Pall Petursson said his government planned to continue taking in refugees in coming years. “We have a duty to invite refugees here,” he said in a recent interview with REFUGEES. “And we want to do a first class job in welcoming and integrating them,” he said with a touch of pride which most Icelanders seem to share.

Iceland’s attitude towards its new arrivals is not only “first class” but almost deluxe compared with other parts of the world. Many European countries, for instance, only accepted Kosovar refugees on a temporary basis. Legal and physical barriers to refugee entry are going up virtually everywhere else.

“Once they arrive in Iceland, they can stay for the rest of their lives,” says Minister Petursson. Refugees are provided with free medical care, a generous financial

grant and apartments or small houses which are furnished by local communities and the Icelandic Red Cross with ev-



UNHCR / R. WILKINSON

At work in the Icelandic capital of Reykjavik.

everything from beds and freezers to children’s toys. Each refugee is given a one year course in the Icelandic language and children are encouraged to continue to study their native language and culture. Local ‘support families’ help the refugees with everything from shopping to religious services to finding a job.

After five years, refugees can apply for citizenship (curiously, they then must take one Icelandic name. Nguyen Van Ho, who works as a mechanic with the Reykjavik county council, is now officially known as Halldor Nguyen).

SHOCK ON SIGHT

Culture shock begins at first contact between refugees and Icelanders. One official remembers his initial exchange with refugees. “I showed one man a map of Iceland, surrounded only by the sea,” this official said. “He was very anxious to know what the name of the nearest country was-

-east or west. Another man remembered that people in Iceland lived in snow houses.”

Vessel Veselaj, his wife and five children, had been herded aboard an infamous ‘refugee train’ in Kosovo in early 1999 and found himself languishing in a Macedonian refugee camp when he was ap-

our children were nervous, wild. No discipline. No schooling for months. Even here, when they see a uniform they ask, ‘Are these policemen going to kill someone?’ But they are becoming happy again. They enjoy school. Even though we are Moslems we sometimes go to the local church. No problem. There is only one God.”

Food might be a problem. A few years ago Iceland was a severely insular society where a visitor might be served such culinary delights as rotten shark and sheep’s head.

CULTURAL AWAKENING

Today, thanks partly to the influx of refugees and a current economic boom, the country is blossoming culturally.

Until recently there was not a single foreign restaurant. Now, in Reykjavik alone, there are around 10 Vietnamese-Chinese eating establishments started by refugees. “We are eating food we knew nothing about 10 years ago,” says Minister Pall Petursson. “They have helped change our eating habits.”

A Serbian exile has spent nearly two years compiling a Serbo-Icelandic dictionary which will be published soon.

To be sure, there are problems in this northern paradise. Some ‘south’ and ‘north’ Vietnamese, enemies during the Indochina war, still eye each other warily. Serbian refugees who arrived in the mid-1990s were ‘surprised and hurt’ when Iceland invited the Kosovars in 1999.

The Red Cross held emergency meetings to calm Serb fears that they had somehow been ‘betrayed’ by their adopted country. “Iceland, after all is a member of NATO and NATO was bombing Kosovo,” a Red Cross official said. “It was a very uncomfortable time for the Serbs.”

Icelandic

authorities took no chances and made sure that most of the Kosovars were housed far from the Serbs. Still, as Minister Pall Petursson now admits, “We were rather anxious about the situation. But nothing happened. It will pass.”

Some people worry, Icelanders and refugees alike, that if the economic boom ends and jobs become scarce, Iceland might become less welcoming than it is today.

That is for the future, but for now 42-year-old Ismet Krasniqi and her four girls and young son are wrestling with the kind of dilemma refugees around the world often face. When Serbian security forces raided her Kosovo village in early 1999, this year, mother and children were separated from her husband. She eventually made it to Macedonia and Iceland and her husband escaped into the mountains, but for a long time each thought the others were dead.

“My life started again in Iceland,” Mrs. Krasniqi said in her neat one-storey home on the outskirts of Dalvik. Her children are attending school and she would like to stay. However, they recently made contact with her husband again and he wants to stay in Kosovo.

“I don’t want to go back,” Mrs. Krasniqi said quietly.

But her 14-year-old daughter, Sadete, had the last word. “We want to live here, but I want my father more than Iceland.” ■



UNHCR / R. WILKINSON

Iceland’s parliament building in downtown Reykjavik.

proached by an Icelandic Red Cross delegation. He was reluctant to go to a place he had never heard of before, but a friend did an Internet search and told him, “Are you crazy? Iceland is paradise compared with here.” Veselaj and his family were waiting for the Red Cross team the next day.

They eventually ended up in the northern Icelandic town of Dalvik, a place many people might consider being on the very edge of the world. Brooding hills, representing an ever present threat of avalanches, tower above the brightly painted homes where 2,300 people live. Deep sea fishing boats line the harbor. A deep fjord leads to the open sea. The next stop literally is the North Pole. Rain squalls and vicious winds lash the area for many days of the year. In summer there is almost permanent daylight and in winter virtual around-the-clock twilight and darkness.

Some refugees have trouble adjusting to this hostile climate. One unlucky arrival who was attempting to repair a roof was recently blown into the sea, along with the roof. He survived.

Vessel Veselaj appears undaunted as he chats in his blue, two-storey, three-bedroomed house on the edge of Dalvik town. “Icelanders are a happy people, even in this darkness. Why not us,” he says. “In Kosovo

Culture shock begins at first contact between refugees and Icelanders.



A church in Iceland’s capital.

UNHCR / R. WILKINSON



UNHCR / M. KOBAYASHI

East Timorese arriving home in Dili.

GOING HOME IS ONLY PART OF THE STORY

Being accepted by old neighbors may be even more difficult

By Paul Stromberg

Alberto sat patiently at a child's school desk in the headquarters of Dili's new civilian police, waiting to quiz an alleged militia member. The suspect's tale had become a familiar one as tens of thousands of East Timorese who had fled or been forcibly evicted from their homes in the chaotic weeks following the territory's vote for independence in 1999, continued to straggle back. As the suspect made his way through a local neighborhood on his first day back he was recog-

nized as one of the militias who had wreaked terror on the capital and was severely beaten before the police could intervene.

Now Alberto, a protection assistant with UNHCR, had been called in to help decide the truth and what to do next. But when Luis Soares was led into the room Alberto broke into a smile. "This one is going to be easy," he recalled. "I knew this man. He was not in the militia."

Soares, the suspect, described how four men had knocked at the door of his home only moments after he, his father and sister had returned. Spurning the offer of coffee, the visitors instead punched and kicked him and insisted his cousins had been militia members and probably responsible for many of the killings in Dili, the East Timor capital.

Once Luis Soares account was con-

firmed, Alberto's next task was more tricky—trying to reintegrate him into a badly traumatized society by acting as an effective honest broker between the returning refugee and a hugely suspicious local community.

While the original mass exodus, the subsequent killings and destruction and then the start of the refugees return, received the bulk of the world's attention, this kind of work has gone largely unheralded. It is often painstakingly slow, labor



UNHCR construction materials to help rebuild East Timor.

intensive, expensive and low-key, but is nevertheless part of the organization's 'core' mandate of providing legal and physical protection for the vulnerable and UNHCR has intervened in dozens of similar cases in Timor.

NO DANGER

Alberto's first move is to assure members of the U.N. mandated police force, commonly known as 'civpol', that Luis Soares poses no danger to the community. He then must track down the leader of the zone where Soares lives and a representative of the territory's fledgling local administration, known by its Portuguese acronym CNRT, to enlist their help in reintegrating this latest returnee and other suspected or real members of the old militias.

"More former militia members are accepting the calls they have heard from leaders like Xanana Gusmao and are coming home to East Timor," says Cristina Planas, UNHCR's senior protection officer in Dili. But they face a difficult and potentially hostile environment.

East Timor's national justice system is still in a planning stage and the territory does not have the capacity to detain, investigate or prosecute alleged killers and criminals. There is deep and simmering resentment among a civilian population which was so deeply traumatized so recently.

"One day a man who villagers may have seen last setting fire to their homes, climbs out of a truck with other returnees," says Cristina Planas. "It is easy to understand the villagers reaction." But, she adds, "Right now, no matter what someone is suspected of, there is no other place for them to go."

The dilemma facing UNHCR protection and local officials is to try to find a balance between all of these conflicting problems and emotions. "We must find an acceptable way to move people back home and to ensure that returnees' rights are respected," Cristina Planas said, while at the same time being sensitive to the pent-up anger of so many civilians.

A case such as



UNHCR staff begin mediation efforts to reintegrate a returnee back into civil society.

Luis Soares points to the dangers of rushing to judgement, these officials tell people over and over again in meetings held in living rooms and communal halls throughout Dili and other centers. There must be no popular revenge. Instead, as Alberto will do with Luis, he patiently and laboriously tries to elicit pledges from neighbors that the returnee will be protected.

PROTECTING PEOPLE, NOT CRIME

"We preach patience," says local attorney Antonio Goncalves. "We make it clear we are protecting people, not crimes." Goncalves is an unlikely conciliator. He was imprisoned by Indonesian authorities in 1986 for independence activities but was eventually able to finish his studies in exile and joined a team of lawyers representing jailed Timorese leader Xanana Gusmao in 1997. He returned to Timor in late December.

"It is not strange to help people others might consider criminals," he said shortly after asking Australian peacekeepers to intervene on behalf of three 'suspect' returnees in his own neighborhood. "It is normal work to reintegrate all East Timorese in order to rebuild Timor."

This work involves talking patiently to

former neighbors about specific cases, soliciting local opinions on the possible return of a particular person and gauging potential opposition. These meetings in turn provide Timorese with an opportunity to air their own worries about the return of former militia.

The work is slow, labor intensive, expensive and low-key, but is part of UNHCR's core mandate of protection.

Some town meetings draw hundreds of people, but the proceedings are generally orderly. At one recent gathering, a local official tells the meeting that the international community must protect all Timorese including one particular person who has not been allowed to return to this zone after he repatriated. Zone leader George Claudio adds his support, telling locals that by preventing the suspect's return they are stooping to the level of the militias.

To no avail. The meeting breaks up without agreement. UNHCR and local officials will try again in a few days, but they have already begun looking for other areas which might accept the man.

Meanwhile, Luis Soares has gone home. He sits on his front porch with local leaders and key neighbors while UNHCR's Alberto explains the purpose of the meeting. Everyone has a chance to speak. Eventually they all nod their assent. Luis has been accepted back home. ■



The refugees were too important to leave to UNHCR

An independent evaluation of the Kosovo crisis gives the agency mixed marks

The 1999 Kosovo crisis was probably the most complex emergency in UNHCR's nearly 50 year history. Within 11 weeks, nearly one million people fled the embattled province and just as suddenly returned home. The agency had never faced such a rapid whiplash of movement—exodus and repatriation—of so many people in such short a time. The humanitarian aspects of the emergency, overwhelming as they were, were nevertheless dwarfed by political and military considerations involving the national interests of the world's leading powers, regional organizations and the involvement of NATO in its first shooting war.

UNHCR recently released the results of an independent report it had commissioned to assess the lessons of this unique crisis. The 141-page document confirmed early criticisms that the agency had performed poorly in some areas of the emergency—responding slowly to the developing crisis, having inadequate emergency supplies in place and deploying senior staff too slowly. The report, however, judged the agency's performance within the unique overall context of the time and concluded that “many factors affecting UNHCR's performance were not under its own control” and that in judging such areas as coordinating other agencies, protecting and registering refugees and the supply of aid itself, critics had ig-

nored or underestimated the complexity of such issues. In the final analysis, the report said, the major powers viewed the fate of the refugees in this particular crisis as too important to their own national interests to leave them to UNHCR alone.

The agency accepted the majority of the findings and said it was already working on methods to strengthen its strategic planning, leadership capacity and ability to respond more quickly to major emergencies.

Within the overall context of the Kosovo crisis, it is also important to note that UNHCR worked effectively to help hundreds of thousands of Kosovars, both before the launch of the NATO airstrikes and after

the refugees returned to Kosovo (the evaluation covered only the actual period of war) and that even during the bombing campaign the refugees had received adequate assistance and mortality rates were

actually below other, similar emergencies.

The following questions and answers address some of the major issues. The answers are direct extracts either from the report itself or from UNHCR's response.

Q. Why is it important to put UNHCR's performance in context of the overall crisis?

A. In political terms, the emergency was a rare event in contemporary international relations. It involved the national in-



Canned food is distributed to refugees arriving in Kukes, Albania, in April, 1999.

terests of major powers, strong regional organizations and military action in Europe. In this situation, the displacement issue became an important element in the diplomacy of war. As a result, many factors affecting UNHCR's performance were not under its own control.

Q. What was the result of the politicized nature of the emergency?

A. It brought enormous resources to the emergency, but relatively little of it was channelled through UNHCR and consultation with UNHCR varied considerably. The top six European Union contributors allocated \$279 million in humanitarian assistance... but UNHCR received only 3.5 percent of this directly.

Q. What differences emerged between



Refugees at Stankovec 2 camp in Macedonia in April, 1999.

UNHCR / H.J. DAVIES



UNHCR / R. CHALASANI

UNHCR and other actors?

A. The most important difference in perspective concerned the first asylum issue in FYR Macedonia. UNHCR vigorously defended unconditional first asylum (a person's right to seek asylum in the first country he/she reached). The United States and United Kingdom were more attuned to destabilization concerns in Macedonia and worried the refugee presence would make the government withdraw its support for NATO's military campaign.

Q. Did UNHCR meet expectations?

A. The political and refugee challenges left UNHCR with a daunting task and limited room to manoeuvre. A persistent gap between expectations and reality fuelled criticism that the agency failed to meet objectives.

Q. What were the external and internal constraints on UNHCR?

A. Externally, these included donors extensively bypassing UNHCR to fund operations directly; significant blurring of humanitarian and military-political missions; the powerful role and agenda of NATO in the humanitarian sector; reluctant government hosts; complex institutional rivalries and the emergency's high visibility. Internally they included, limited 'surge' capacity of staff and other resources for emergencies, inappropriate decision making structures, limited financial and human resources, recent restructuring and

underestimation of the special requirements of a high profile emergency.

Q. Should UNHCR have anticipated the crisis?

A. UNHCR did not anticipate the size and speed of the exodus, nor could it reasonably be expected to have done so. No aid agency has subsequently claimed it anticipated this kind of outflow.

Q. Did UNHCR meet its own assistance standards?

A. The levels of UNHCR's emergency stockpiles were below the agreed target of 250,000 persons and the decision to dispatch emergency response teams was not taken soon enough. (However) the refugees generally received adequate assistance and mortality rates were well below the generally accepted threshold for emergencies and there were no serious epidemics.

Q. How can UNHCR's assistance be improved?

A. It could improve supply capacity to meet existing standards; use its own resources to encourage other actors to allocate their own capabilities and either coordinate more fully or delegate activities when appropriate to other actors such as the World Food Program. The agency should also develop 'standby' agreements and other 'service' packages with governments and organizations.

Q. What were manpower deployment problems?

A. Staff deployment was generally slow, critical mid-level management for field operations was lacking and some key field positions were not staffed. The agency had an insufficient number of high-level staff to address critical diplomatic challenges.

Q. Did UNHCR fulfil its coordination role?

A. Weakness in staff deployment reduced the effectiveness of UNHCR's coordination role. At the same time, the dominance of bilateralism and the presence of

numerous actors made system-wide coordination extraordinarily difficult. UNHCR was the accepted, rather than the formally designated, lead agency and it could only coordinate those (among an estimated 250 non-governmental organizations and governments) willing to be coordinated.

Q. How did UNHCR perform its protection role?

A. UNHCR invested considerable effort to provide international protection in a difficult context. The outflow presented the agency with particular pressures exercised by key donor states whose interests were tied to the NATO military campaign and not necessarily to universal standards of protection. Some donors criticized the agency for not being sufficiently sensitive to the destabilization concerns of Macedonia. Some human rights groups criticized the agency for not putting enough pressure on the government (on behalf of refugees). UNHCR performed as well as the situation permitted.

Q. How did UNHCR perform on registration of refugees?

A. The pressure to register refugees stemmed from concerns that differ from normal operations; it focused on family tracing and issues related to denial of nationality rather than the provision of assistance. This led to unrealistic demands from donors, and UNHCR could not reasonably have been expected to complete a full registration in the 11 weeks the emergency lasted. UNHCR's registration policy, however, should be modified and technological advances experimented with during Kosovo could contribute to protection activities if refined.

Q. Why did UNHCR work with the military in Kosovo?

A. Although UNHCR's status as a non-political humanitarian organization would seem to preclude close cooperation with a military, in Kosovo it was widely accepted as necessary to save lives. Cooperation has been similarly accepted when military forces were involved in U.N.-authorized peace enforcement operations. ■



UNHCR / H.J. DAVIES

A NATO center for new arrivals in Macedonia.

■ **BELGRADE:** Infamous Serbian paramilitary leader 'Arkan' was gunned down in a Belgrade hotel.

■ **TIMOR:** Some 150,000 refugees have returned to East Timor but militiamen continued to hamper repatriation.

Seeking asylum

GEORGIA

The U.N. Security Council approved a six-month renewal until the end of July to the 101-member U.N. Observer Mission in Georgia which, together with Russian and other contingents has been helping to keep the peace between the government and the break-away Abkhazia region (REFUGEES magazine, N° 117). More than 250,000 ethnic Georgians fled the Abkhazia region during the 1992-93 civil war and there have been periodic outbursts of renewed fighting there and in other parts of the former Soviet Republic during the 1990s.

UGANDA

A December 1999 agreement between Sudan and Uganda seeking to end years of conflict along their common border has begun to pay modest dividends. A group of 21 Ugandans who were kidnapped by the so-called Lord's Resistance Army which has terrorized north and central Uganda for a decade recently returned home. Another 54 people were handed over to U.N. authorities in Khartoum. The LRA has seized as many as 10,000 young people in recent years.

BOSNIA

Five Bosnian Croats have been found guilty of crimes against humanity by the United Nations tribunal for former Yugoslavia. They were sentenced to prison terms ranging from six to 25 years in connection with the massacre of an estimated 100 Muslim villagers in the village of Ahmici in 1993 when gangs of Croats overran the area and killed everyone in sight. The defendants were arrested by British soldiers and went on trial in August 1998. A sixth defendant was acquitted.

BURUNDI

Another peace effort for Burundi



Former South African President Nelson Mandela, pictured with U.N. Secretary-General Kofi Annan, is the new Burundi mediator.

One of Africa's most venerated leaders, the late President Julius Nyerere of Tanzania, tried without much success to broker some progress in one of the continent's most intractable crises. Now, another distinguished leader, former South African President Nelson Mandela has assumed the role of mediator to try to end the conflict in the tiny central African state of Burundi where more than 200,000 people have been killed in a seemingly never ending civil war. Mandela, a Nobel Peace Prize winner, South Africa's first democratically elected president and perhaps the

most revered of any world statesman today, began his task with a verbal broadside against the government leaders, soldiers and rebels of the tiny country of six million people. "Why do you allow yourselves to be regarded as leaders without talent, leaders without vision?" he demanded in his first meeting with them. "When people in the West hear these things (of the ongoing atrocities) they say 'Africans are still barbarians. No human being could do what they are doing. Please join the modern world.'"

Burundi has been wracked for decades by on-again off-again wars between the majority Hutu people and the minority Tutsis

who, nevertheless, have dominated the country since independence from Belgium in 1962. As the war intensified in recent months, the government herded an estimated 350,000 civilians into 'regroupment camps' to allow the army to more easily pursue Hutu rebels—a ploy it has tried unsuccessfully in the past. Under pressure from Mandela and the U.N. Security Council, Burundi agreed to start dismantling these camps, but a meaningful negotiated breakthrough which would allow hundreds of thousands of displaced Burundians, and 330,000 refugees in Tanzania, to return home still appears a long way away. ■

EUROPE

Asylum claims in Europe jump in 1999

The number of people seeking asylum in Europe in 1999 rose to 437,400, an increase of 19 percent compared with the previous year. Germany continued to receive the largest overall number of applications, a total of 95,300 followed by the United Kingdom with 91,400 and Switzerland with 46,100. Compared to a country's population size, Liechtenstein came out on top, receiving 16.3 asylum seekers per 1,000 inhabitants followed by Luxem-

bourg, 6.8 and Switzerland 6.5. Portugal received the lowest number of asylum seekers compared with its total population at 0.03 percent, less than one third the European average. Slovakia experienced the largest increase in the number of applicants last year, the figure rising by 155 percent followed by Liechtenstein, 126 percent and Finland with an increase of 122 percent. The number of people seeking refuge in the Netherlands and Sweden dropped by 13 percent

in 1999 and the overall German figure, while still the highest in Europe, decreased by three percent compared with the previous year. Interestingly, a separate U.N. report suggests that Europe will need 160 million immigrant workers by the year 2025 to support a rapidly ageing population which is set to decline by five million in the next quarter century. The ratio of workers to non-workers was also set to halve in the same period. ■

■ U.N. The U.N. raised \$1.47 billion towards its \$2.2 billion target for relief aid in 1999 with the U.S., European Union and Japan the largest donors.

■ TIMOR: A quarter of East Timorese refugee children suffer from acute malnutrition.

■ NEW ZEALAND: The government said it will ban all HIV-positive immigrants, including refugees, starting July 1.

■ TIMOR: United Nations peacekeepers have taken over responsibility for security in East Timor from the Australian-led multinational force (INTERFET).

CROATIA

A new start for Croatia's refugees?

There may be a glimmer of hope at the end of the tunnel for hundreds of thousands of civilians who fled Croatia during the 1991-95 war in former Yugoslavia. Following the recent death of President Franjo Tudjman, the country's new government said it wants to move quickly to introduce sweeping democratic reforms... and allow refugees and internally displaced persons to return to their old homes. In one encouraging sign, during

recent parliamentary and presidential campaigns, the issue was treated as a humanitarian and social problem rather than the highly sensitive political one it was during the Tudjman era. "I am ready to make gestures that will help end collective accusations (of the Serb minority) even if no such gestures come from their side," President-elect Stipe Mesic said in one interview. The new authorities have said all refugees, whether from Croatia itself or

from Bosnia-Herzegovina, have the right to return. They have also told UNHCR that certain discriminatory laws which have effectively blocked the return of civilians will be expunged. Croatia has paid lip service to the return of refugees in the past, and although 112,000 have gone home, including 36,000 Croatian Serbs from the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, an estimated 280,000 are still in that country and neighboring Bosnia. ■



UNHCR / F. DEL MUNDO

A new beginning? Croatian Serbs who fled the Krajina region in 1995 could soon return.

ERITREA

A fresh start in Eritrea

UNHCR has restarted operations in the east African state of Eritrea after an absence of nearly three years. The agency was expelled from the country in May, 1997 over what the Eritreans saw as its 'undue insistence' on the return of Eritrean refugees from eastern Sudan. Relations between those two countries im-

proved recently and Eritrea opened an embassy in Khartoum in January after a six-year-long break in ties. That helped pave the way for UNHCR's return to the region where it hopes to draw up plans to repatriate nearly 150,000 Eritreans who fled to Sudan, some as long as a quarter century ago. ■

Seeking asylum

CHINA

UNHCR has condemned

China for deporting seven North Koreans who the agency had recognized as refugees back to their home country. The North Koreans, ranging from 13 to 30 years old, entered China to seek food. They were subsequently caught by Russian guards while crossing the border from China and were recognized as having refugee status. However, they were returned to China which in turn sent them back to North Korea saying it viewed the seven no differently than thousands of other North Koreans who have crossed the border searching for food.

BELGIUM

Belgium recently offered people

residing illegally in the country—the so-called 'sans papiers', a one time opportunity to regularize their residency. Between 35,000-40,000 applications were received and will be examined by panels consisting of a lawyer, magistrate and a non-governmental organization. Applicants include persons who had requested refugee status in recent years without receiving a final decision, persons who can demonstrate humanitarian reasons to stay, who are seriously ill or who cannot return to their former countries of residence or nationality for reasons beyond their control.



Microsoft's Bill Gates and High Commissioner Sadako Ogata at the recent Davos economic summit meeting.



Mobile Microsoft registration kits in Dakar, Senegal

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kits could be fully deployed, but field tests have continued since then with upgraded software. UNHCR has been provided with 100 of the 40 kilogram, \$20,000 portable kits, accompanied by their own generators and recently deployed several of them to the west African state of Senegal to help registration there. Says UNHCR information systems analyst Ioli Kimyaci who worked in Senegal, "Normally the refugees have to come to us for registration. It is a time consuming and inefficient process. Now we can go directly to the refugees. It takes 10 minutes to set up the system and begin work. It's very easy to use." In addition to the kits themselves, Microsoft will continue to support the program by providing backup personnel and technical advice. In an assessment of its Kosovo performance, UNHCR recognized that it needed to strengthen its registration procedures. The mobile kits will go a long way towards reaching that goal. ■

Technology transfer

As hundreds of thousands of refugees poured out of Kosovo in early 1999 one of the most distressing aspects of their plight was the attempt by Serbian authorities to strip many of them of any form of identification – effectively trying to make them 'non persons'. UNHCR registers refugees—but only after they have settled in a camp or a reception center and normally to allow them to receive emergency aid such as food. The scale and speed of the Kosovo exodus and the

need to give back to the refugees an identity was obviously a problem of a far greater dimension than in a 'normal' refugee crisis. Microsoft, aided by industry partners such as Hewlett-Packard, Compaq, Securit and ScreenCheck—developed from scratch a so-called registration field kit including computers, digital cameras, signature pads, special ID card printers and related hardware and software. The majority of refugees returned home before the revolutionary

Goodwill ambassador

One of the Arab world's most famous showbiz personalities, Egyptian comedian Adel Imam, has become a goodwill ambassador for UNHCR in the Middle East and North Africa. Imam, who is in his 60s and whose latest film, Hello America, was a hit, will combine his acting career and his new duties. "As goodwill ambassador I will try to accomplish three main missions," he said. "They include visiting refugee areas worldwide, fund raising and developing artistic projects to benefit refugees." ■

Sports aid

Norway's three-time Olympic speed skating gold medal winner Dr. Johann Koss has established a humanitarian fund raising group called Olympic Aid to coincide with the September games in Sydney. The organization hopes to raise at least five million Australian dollars from the public and industry. The bulk of the donations will be channeled

through UNHCR to refugee children projects in education, health and sport. Some of the funds will help promote an 'Olympic Sports Day' in 12 refugee camps around the world in June where youngsters will play a series of events including soccer, volleyball, netball running and jumping. Australian disadvantaged children will benefit from the local part of the Olympic Aid project run by Australian tennis stars Pat Rafter and Evonne Goolagong. ■



“What is a refugee? They don’t care. They are all homeless” yet “two-thirds of the homeless people in the world are classified with the odious acronym of internally displaced persons.”

America’s U.N. ambassador Richard Holbrooke during a U.N. debate on the difference between the two groups.

“Can we speak of any substantive reconstruction program, like those generously funded by governments in Kosovo or East Timor, in any African country.”

U.N. High Commissioner for Refugees Sadako Ogata on the world’s ambivalence toward long-term aid for Africa.



“I asked for funds. All we have to date are pledges, but not a single dollar.”

Gen. Klaus Reinhardt, Commander of NATO forces in Kosovo on efforts to raise \$120 million to pay civil servants in the province.



“The whole town is like Coventry, or Warsaw or Stalingrad, there’s nothing worse.”

A Chechen civilian comparing the destruction of his capital, Grozny, with other cities destroyed in World War II.

“Look at what happened in Bosnia in five years and then see what has happened in Kosovo in five months, and please stop the preaching. Never has a U.N. mission gone so fast.”

U.N. Kosovo administrator Bernard Kouchner answering charges the U.N. was not moving fast enough in the province.



“The children don’t cry anymore. That is the scariest

part. I think our children have forgotten how to cry.”

A Chechen nurse describing the destruction of her region and its people.



“When they hear (about the killings) people say ‘Africans are still barbarians – no human beings could do what they are doing. Please join the modern world.’”

Former South African President Nelson Mandela, in his new capacity as a mediator for the conflict in Burundi, appealing to the various factions to make peace.



“We are all against terrorism... but the force used against them must be proportionate. We must be very careful to avoid a situation in which violence is visited on civilians.”

U.N. Secretary-General Kofi Annan on the role of the Russian military in Chechnya.



“The misery of the Burundi people affects us all and diminishes the humanity of all of us.”

Former South African President Nelson Mandela as he took up a new role as mediator to try to halt the fighting in Burundi.



“The forces of disintegration are substantially stronger than the forces of integration.”

Carl Bildt, former High Representative in Bosnia, on the situation in Kosovo.



“Serbs here feel the same as the Jews in Auschwitz.”

A Serb leader in the Kosovo town of Mitrovica following recent ethnic clashes.

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