

REFUGEES

VOLUME 1 • NUMBER 130 • 2003

**Sri Lanka:
Emerging from
the ruins**

The Road to **Recovery**



Editor:

Ray Wilkinson

French editor:

Mounira Skandrani

Contributors:

UNHCR Sri Lanka staff,
Morgan Morris, Brenda Barton,
Betty Talbot, Fernando del Mundo,
Millicent Mutuli, Astrid Van
Genderen Stort, Jack Redden

Editorial assistant:

Virginia Zekrya

Photo department:

Suzy Hopper,
Anne Kellner

Design:

Vincent Winter Associés

Production:

Aloha Scan - Geneva
Françoise Peyroux

Distribution:

John O'Connor, Frédéric Tissot

Maps:

UNHCR - Mapping Unit

Historical documents

UNHCR archives

REFUGEES is published by the Media Relations and Public Information Service of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. The opinions expressed by contributors are not necessarily those of UNHCR. The designations and maps used do not imply the expression of any opinion or recognition on the part of UNHCR concerning the legal status of a territory or of its authorities.

REFUGEES reserves the right to edit all articles before publication. Articles and photos not covered by copyright may be reprinted without prior permission. Please credit UNHCR and the photographer. Glossy prints and slide duplicates of photographs not covered by copyright may be made available for professional use only.

English and French editions printed in Italy by AMILCARE PIZZI S.p.A., Milan.
Circulation: 224,000 in English, French, German, Italian, Spanish, Arabic, Russian and Chinese.

ISSN 0252-791 X

Cover: Hope amidst the ruins.

UNHCR/R.CHALASANI/CS/LKA•2002

UNHCR

P.O. Box 2500
1211 Geneva 2, Switzerland
www.unhcr.org

REFUGEES

N ° 130 - 2003

UNHCR/R.CHALASANI/CS/LKA•2002



4 The war lasted for nearly two decades. Around 65,000 people were killed and more than one million were forced from their homes. But in the last year a fragile peace has returned to Sri Lanka. Hundreds of thousands of persons have already gone back and the return is expected to continue this year.



UNHCR/A.TAYLOR/CS/71A•2002

23 To highlight not only their special problems, but also the resilience of millions of displaced young persons, UNHCR has dedicated World Refugee Day this year to youth.

UNHCR/A.BEHRING/CS/CIY•2003



28 It was once one of the most stable countries in Africa, but today Côte d'Ivoire is at the center of that continent's latest troubles.

2

EDITORIAL

A glimmer of hope for some of the world's worst humanitarian crises.

4

COVER STORY

It was one of the world's longest running conflicts, but hundreds of thousands of civilians in Sri Lanka are 'giving peace a chance.'

By Ray Wilkinson

Chronology

A brief look at Sri Lanka's recent history.

Local experiences

Humanitarian workers at the center of the storm.

It's a minefield

Cleaning up after the guns fall silent.

16

WORLD NEWS

A global map of the latest refugee developments.

Death, despair, hope

Working on both sides of the front line.

23

YOUTH

World Refugee Day celebrates young people.

28

SHORT TAKES

A roundup of stories from around the world.

30

PEOPLE AND PLACES

31

QUOTE UNQUOTE

“Don't forget us if Iraq happens...”

More than a quarter of a million civilians returned home in the last year following two decades of war in Sri Lanka.

In Afghanistan more than two million people went back in 2002 and UNHCR expects to help a further 1.5 million this year.

A massive repatriation will start shortly in Angola—yet another country where war persisted

military and political fallout from the ‘new’ emergency also spills over.

Afghan President Hamid Karzai articulated the concerns of governments, humanitarian officials and refugees alike in the buildup to war when he urged the United States: “Don't forget us if Iraq happens.”

The situations in Sri Lanka, Afghanistan and Angola are both delicate and extremely promising. Tens of thousands of persons were killed and millions fled their homes in wars which lasted for generations. But within a few months of each other, hopes for peaceful solutions blossomed. This hope will only come to full bloom with the continued attention and assistance of global goodwill.

Around half of the world's displaced persons—some 20 million people—are children and what is loosely termed ‘young people’ between the ages of 13 and 25.

There are a myriad of agencies and international laws to protect the children of this group, but relatively little attention has been paid toward the problems of youth.

Which is a great pity. At a sensitive time in their lives, when they are completing their social, education and sexual personas, young people find themselves particularly vulnerable to various forms of exploitation.

To highlight not only their special needs, but also the key roles they will play in the development of their local communities and nations—whether they return to their ancestral homes or begin life in a new country—this year's World Refugee Day on June 20 is dedicated to youth.



UNHCR/R. CHALASANI/CE/LKA-2003

Returnees to Sri Lanka.

for decades and where a peaceful outcome at times seemed highly unlikely.

That is the good news. However, as this magazine went to press conflict in the Middle East began with the threat of the creation of hundreds of thousands of new refugees. There were fears the conflict would dominate not only world headlines, but also the attention and purse strings of traditional donors which help uprooted people in all corners of the globe.

In such circumstances, funding for ongoing refugee operations sometimes suffers and the



Going home.

After two decades of war, SRI LANKA IS ON THE MEND

by Ray Wilkinson

The sleek grey vessel sliced out of the midnight darkness and rammed the tiny fishing boat broadside on. Moments before, 23-year-old Mohan Raj Sumathi was flung headlong into the sea, two male passengers grabbed her three-year-old daughter, Rana, as the boatload of 20 people began fighting for their lives in the pitch black waters.

The 18-foot long plastic fishing vessel was following an 'inside' channel on the short 25 kilometer route between India and Sri Lanka when the second ship, possibly a patrol boat, hit it. Fortunately, the panicked passengers, none of them able to swim, were protected from deeper seas and greater danger by a necklace of islands known as Adam's Bridge. As they struggled to stay afloat in the shallows, Rana held above the waves by her two benefactors, the fishermen righted their capsized boat and the group eventually reached safety.

"We lost everything except our lives, but many people kissed the land when we reached Sri Lanka," the young mother said as she recounted her traumatic return in December last year. "It feels good, very good to be back. I have no regrets."

Her homeland had once been described as the Pearl of the Indian Ocean where the term Serendib (fairy tale) was coined, an exotic tourist destination with breathtaking beaches, herds of elephant and other wildlife, rare birds and elegant peacocks.

But this dreamy spice island began turning into a living nightmare within years of achieving inde-

pendence from Great Britain in 1948. The majority Sinhalese government adopted a series of measures such as making their dialect, Sinhala, the country's sole official language and controlling access to university places, moves which the minority Tamil community viewed as a deliberate attempt to marginalize it.

Simmering resentment exploded into violent confrontation in July 1983, when 13 government soldiers were killed in an ambush by guerrillas of a group calling itself the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) demanding full independence for the nearly three million Tamils.

Nearly two decades of civil war followed. The Pearl of the Indian Ocean became the Teardrop of Buddha—a reference to its distinctive physical shape and the desperate straits into which it had sunk.

DESTRUCTION AND KILLINGS

Hundreds of villages and towns were literally flattened, mainly on the northern Jaffna Peninsula, the neighboring Vanni region and in the east of the country. The world paid only fleeting attention to this obscure internal struggle, but an estimated 65,000 persons were killed in conflicts which ranged from small-scale hit-and-run raids to massive head-on pitched battles. A new form of warfare became commonplace, the precursor of a worldwide phenomenon—the suicide bomber.

More than one million people—one in every 18 Sri Lankans—including Tamils such as Mohan Raj Sumathi, Sinhalese and members of the country's



Safe after a narrow escape.

NEARLY TWO DECADES OF CIVIL WAR FOLLOWED. HUNDREDS OF VILLAGES WERE FLATTENED.
AN ESTIMATED 65,000 PERSONS WERE KILLED. MORE THAN ONE MILLION PEOPLE WERE UPROOTED.



ON THE MEND

sizeable Muslim community, fled or were forcibly uprooted from their homes. The great majority became internally displaced, moving between temporary welfare centers, friends or relatives homes, sometimes as many as 10 or 20 times during their prolonged wanderings. They stayed in each place sometimes for days, sometimes for years, as the course of the conflict ebbed and flowed across the shattered landscape.

Around one million people left the country altogether. Many established thriving communities in Europe, North America and Australia, though others fled as refugees to neighboring India in several waves during the 1980s and 1990s and became known in the Indian press as the region's new 'boat people.'

Mohan Raj Sumathi was one of the last to go to the 'big neighbor' in 1998 and her story was typical of countless others. Her home village on the Jaffna Peninsula repeatedly changed hands along with the fortunes of war. A teenager, pretty and single, she decided to leave with her mother and brother rather than risk being forcibly recruited by the LTTE as a soldier or running afoul of the army. She escaped in the same

kind of fishing boat she would later return home on, spent two years in a refugee camp where she met her husband and started a family in exile.

She had harbored few hopes of returning home quickly, she said. After all, there had already been several peace attempts in the last few years, but all had ended in failure. And the war, like conflicts in Afghanistan and Angola, had degenerated into a grinding conflict seemingly without end and without solution—in humanitarian parlance a so-called protracted crisis (REFUGEES magazine, N° 129).

BREAKTHROUGH

Remarkably, however, there were recent major breakthroughs in all three regions. An estimated two million Afghans returned home following the fall of the hard-line Taliban regime in Kabul in 2001. In Angola, the scene of one of the world's most intractable wars in which hundreds of thousands of persons were killed and more than four million uprooted, a major repatriation also began and was expected to gather momentum through this year.



A makeshift schoolhouse for returning children.

UNHCR/R. CHALASANI/232669



UNICEF/R. CHALASANI/CS/LGA-2002

In February last year, Colombo and the LTTE, both wearied and debilitated by the years of fighting, signed a cease-fire accord, began protracted negotiations and announced a series of compromises. The Tamil Tigers, for instance, eventually dropped their demand for an independent state in favor of autonomy within a new government structure and in turn were allowed to expand their political presence in some regions of the country.

All sides were only too aware of previous failures, but under the umbrella of a Norwegian diplomatic initiative, the cease-fire held throughout last year and into 2003.

Traumatized civilians inside the country voted with their feet. With few possessions and little money, small family groups hopped aboard trucks and tractors and headed back to their destroyed towns and villages. The Sri Lankan return lacked the drama and spectacle of Kosovo or Rwanda

where hundreds of thousands of people went back in a matter of days in unstoppable waves, filmed every inch of the way by the world's media.

Here it was almost a stealthy homecoming in ones and twos, but no less significant than those other returns. By spring, around 260,000 Sri Lankans had gone back and if the guns stay silent, the rate of return was expected to continue at a similar pace through 2003.

Several hundred of the estimated 64,000 refugees in Indian camps also came home, some like Mohan Raj Sumathi preferring to risk the perilous trip by boat because initially it was faster and involved less ►

WEARIED AND DEBILITATED BY YEARS OF FIGHTING, THE GOVERNMENT AND THE TAMIL TIGERS LAST YEAR SIGNED A CEASE-FIRE ACCORD, BEGAN PROTRACTED NEGOTIATIONS AND ANNOUNCED A SERIES OF COMPROMISES. AROUND 260,000 CIVILIANS RETURNED HOME.

ON THE MEND

official red tape than other routes. UNHCR has now established a free and safer formal repatriation program for potential returnees.

INCREASED PACE

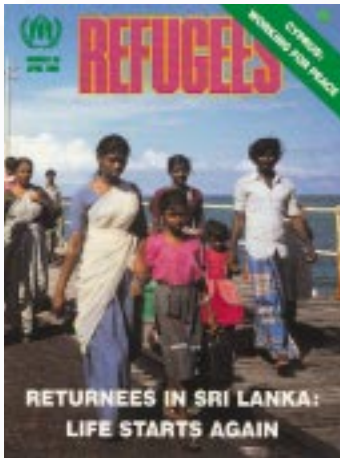
Neill Wright, UNHCR's representative in Sri Lanka, said he expected the pace of this refugee return to increase significantly once cheap sea ferry routes, halted during the war, were re-established.

Assisting those refugees will be a major focus for the agency, but it has already significantly boosted its activities to support the dramatic shift toward peace, approving a \$10 million supplementary budget for this year and expanding its physical presence in the war-affected areas.

The organization will continue to spearhead international efforts to enforce its traditional mandate—offering legal and physical protection for war-affected civilians—as well as financing a range of special projects to provide new temporary shelter, health and sanitation facilities, kick starting various community services and cheap and quick income generating projects to enable returnees to become self-sufficient.

“A lot of these activities are bridging programs which are necessary until long-term aid from other agencies can kick in later this year,” Wright said. “There has been a major breakthrough and it is essential to keep the momentum going.”

Other, earlier repatriations have faltered at this stage because what is now referred to in humanitarian circles as the ‘gap’ was allowed to develop between the emergency phase of a refugee crisis and the subsequent need for sustained, long-term development. In response to harrowing television footage of refugees fleeing and dying, the international community all too often has been prepared to pump lav-



Returning home in 1989. But the war would soon start again.

UNHCR WILL CONTINUE TO OFFER LEGAL AND PHYSICAL PROTECTION OF CIVILIANS, AS WELL AS FINANCING A RANGE OF SPECIAL PROJECTS.

ish funds into an emergency, but has been much more reluctant to foot the bill for less sexy and even more expensive community and national rebuilding. Humanitarian and development organizations compounded this problem by cooperating only fitfully.

Last year, High Commissioner Ruud Lubbers announced what he called a 4Rs initiative in which governments and major organizations would in future work much more closely together with the aim of providing a seamless flow of aid through an emergency's major phases—repatriation, reintegration, rehabilitation and reconstruction—hopefully elimi-

nating the infamous ‘gap.’

Sri Lanka was selected as one of four global regions to field-test this concept. “Returnee and reintegration assistance alone won't help Sri Lanka erase the damage wrought by years of conflict and economic stagnation,” Lubbers said recently and pledged UNHCR would work closely with institutions such as the World Bank, the U.N. Development Program and the Asian Development Bank.

The refugee agency has one other major plus in its column as it helps to try to put Sri Lanka together again, according to Wright and other senior UNHCR veterans. “We were one of the few international organizations which was involved throughout most of the crisis, even when things got very rough,” Wright said. “We now have a lot of credibility—with the government, with the LTTE and with the civilians we have been helping. We helped make a difference and this has translated into donor support for our operations here.”

LONG, DIFFICULT, DANGEROUS

When the agency opened its first office in Colombo on November 2, 1987, its aims appeared to be clear-cut and short-term. The military situation had apparently stabilized and India dispatched a peacekeeping force to Sri Lanka. UNHCR agreed, under its mainstream mandate, to help the estimated 100,000 refugees then in India to return home. The prospects for a lasting peace looked good.

An internal report underlined the reality: “Though only modest, UNHCR's role is widely acknowledged as being a catalyst in promoting a favorable climate for the re-establishment of normal life in the north and east of the country.”

There was no foreboding at this time the situation would soon change so dramatically that the organization would be plunged into uncharted waters, becoming involved in one of its longest, most difficult and most dangerous operations.

Fighting between the army and the LTTE intensified in the early 1990s and swirled with increased ferocity across the north and east. The numbers of newly displaced persons increased dramatically. Even some of the

refugees UNHCR had helped return home to start a new life were forced to flee again.

The government and the U.N. Secretary-General asked the agency to expand its operations to include not only the refugees immediately under its mandate, but the far more numerous internally displaced. In the context of Sri Lanka's civil war, it was virtually impossible to differentiate between IDPs and refugee returnees.

UNHCR agreed. It would be one of the first times the agency became heavily involved with IDPs in such large numbers, but this new commitment did raise

Sri Lanka at a glance

February 4, 1948

Ceylon gains **independence** after 152 years of British rule.

June 1956

Sinhala, the language of the majority Sinhalese population, is designated the country's **sole official language**, the first of several government measures which the minority Tamil population worried were officially inspired efforts to **marginalize** them.

1972

Ceylon changes its name to **Sri Lanka** and **Buddhism** is given primary place as the country's religion, **further antagonizing** the Hindu Tamil community.

1976

The Liberation **Tigers of Tamil Eelam** (LTTE), one of several Tamil military or political organizations, is formed as **tensions increase** in the north and east of the country.

July 23, 1983

Thirteen government **soldiers killed** in an LTTE ambush at Tinnevely effectively **beginning the country's civil war** during which the guerrillas will demand full independence for the country's nearly three million Tamils. **Several hundred Tamil civilians killed** in systematic anti-Tamil rioting and conflict spreads in northern Sri Lanka. Large numbers of **civilians begin fleeing** their homes, becoming internally displaced within Sri Lanka or refugees in neighboring India.

1987

Government forces isolate LTTE in the northern city of Jaffna and Colombo **reaches agreement** with India, which is sympathetic to the Tamil cause, on the **deployment of an Indian peacekeeping force** to the island.

November 2, 1987

UNHCR begins operations in Sri Lanka, primarily **to assist in the repatriation** of an estimated 100,000 refugees from India. At this time there are an **estimated 400,000 civilians uprooted** from their homes, but as the conflict continues through the 1990s, this rises to **more than one million**

1991

The LTTE is **implicated in the assassination** of Indian Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi in southern India by a suicide bomber and two years later **President Premadasa is killed in a bomb attack** by the LTTE, possibly the first group to introduce **suicide bombings** as a military strategy.

February 2002

After several previously failed attempts at peace, the government and Tamil Tigers **sign a permanent cease-fire agreement**, paving the way for talks under a **new peace initiative** sponsored by Norway.

2002

A peace dividend begins. The

© SEAN SUTTON/PANOS PICTURES



Nothing escaped the ravages of war.

displaced civilians.

1991

The last **Indian troops leave** after getting bogged down in **escalating fighting** in the north of the country and the LTTE forces **take over** many of the vacated areas.

1991

UNHCR expands its operations following a specific request by the U.N. Secretary-General, to include **helping hundreds of thousands** of civilians **internally displaced** within the country. **It is one of the first times** the agency has worked with such large numbers of IDPs anywhere.

January 31, 1996

A suicide bomb **kills more than 100 civilians** and wounds another 1,300 at the Central Bank in the capital, Colombo, and the government **extends a state of emergency** across the country.

1997-2000

Continuous and intensive fighting in the north and east of the country as the **fortunes of war** swing back and forth. **President Kumaratunga is wounded** and more than 20 others killed by a female suicide bomber at an election rally in 1999. **As many as 65,000 persons are killed** during the nearly two-decade long conflict.

major highway linking the northern Jaffna Peninsula with the rest of the country **opens for the first time in 12 years**; airline flights to Jaffna resume; the government temporarily lifts its ban on the Tamil Tigers who **drop their demand for a separate state** in favor of some form of autonomy.

2002-2003

As a series of **negotiations continue**, some 260,000 internally displaced civilians **return to their homes**. Around 1,000 refugees arrive back from India. To consolidate the peace process, **UNHCR expands** both its presence in the areas most affected by the conflict and its overall budget to nearly \$15 million. The agency will **assist hundreds of thousands** of IDPs and refugees still waiting to go back to their villages with protection and material assistance programs.

UNHCR WILL ASSIST HUNDREDS OF THOUSANDS OF IDPs AND REFUGEES STILL WAITING TO GO BACK TO THEIR VILLAGES.

Field protection.



UNHCR/R. CHALASANI/CS/LKA*2002

UNHCR/R. WILKINSON/CS/LKA*2003

questions about its mandate and when, where and how it should help some or all of the 20-25 million internally displaced people worldwide. Although suffering similar privations to refugees, internally displaced persons do not enjoy similar international protection afforded refugees.

“WE WERE ONE OF THE FEW INTERNATIONAL ORGANIZATIONS INVOLVED THROUGHOUT THE CRISIS. WE NOW HAVE A LOT OF CREDIBILITY. WE HELPED MAKE A DIFFERENCE.”

Many live in so-called ‘failed states’ such as Somalia. Paradoxically, this may make it easier for international organizations to help them because they can impose their own rules and guidelines. But in Sri Lanka, while providing material assistance and advocating on both sides that civilians must enjoy basic human rights, UNHCR was fully aware that a functioning sovereign government was the ultimate authority and protector of the population while the LTTE insisted it spoke for the entire Tamil community.

RAZOR’S EDGE

“We were walking a constant tightrope,” said Janet Lim who was the agency’s representative in the late 1990s. “Whatever move you made, it was likely to unsettle one side or another.”

As an internal debate within the agency on its global role towards IDPs continued through the 1990s and into the new millennium, UNHCR’s operations

in Sri Lanka periodically came under review.

“At times it was touch and go,” Lim recalls. There were doubts about the IDP involvement, about costs and the seeming futility of the conflict. Luckily, perhaps “It was a low cost program and we were punching above our financial weight at the time,” Lim said. “We gained enormous respect for staying, but if we had pulled out, as it was suggested occasionally, we would never have been able to return. It would have been a disaster for so many people we were trying to help.”

On the ground, field personnel were confronted with enormous personal risk. In the past, protection officers worked on the fringes of ongoing conflicts, helping refugees who had already reached safety. But they, along with other emergency staff, were now pitched into the center of the storm. Officials worked on both sides of the front lines, in government and LTTE-controlled territory, trying to protect civilians, ferrying emergency supplies through and around fighting zones, risking attack from both the ground and the air, and even on occasion, from the sea (see stories pages 12 and 20).

Officials had to win and maintain the confidence of both sides to be able to continue their work rather than being branded as military spies, an easy charge to make against anyone moving between opposing armies.

A 1989 internal assessment described the delicate situation: “The repatriation operation in Sri Lanka skates on a glassy pond, and the pirouettes and arabesques that we go through bear no resemblance to those in any other UNHCR program.”

It added: “Security is tenuous, and incidents resulting in injury and death are frequent. The staff must be simultaneously diplomatic, courageous, patient, wary and energetic. They must also maintain their neutrality.”

In addition to working with large numbers of IDPs, the agency introduced the new concept of ‘open relief centers’—sites where vulnerable civilians received material help and protection in-country and where both armies agreed to respect UNHCR’s moral



Returning fishermen in Jaffna.



Emergency distribution.

UNHCR/R. WILKINSON/CS/LKA-2003

Children's playtime.



UNHCR/R. CHALASANI/CS/LKA-2003



UNHCR/R. CHALASANI/CS/LKA-2003

Lessons in avoiding sexual violence.

authority. The centers also obviated the aim of some civilians to flee further afield to India.

Tens of thousands of people took refuge in these centers though there were setbacks. The most infamous occurred at a center called Madhu when one shell hit a church steeple, killing around 50 people. Critics questioned the very concept of the centers and their aim of short-circuiting another mass flight to India, but Janet Lim said, "For me the argument boiled down to the relative safety these centers offered when there was so much fighting and misery. We didn't have the luxury of guaranteeing absolute safety. A practical solution was the key. They worked."

ASSESSING THE SITUATION

As peace talks continued through spring this year, a visitor recently toured the war-affected areas.

The fighting had generally been confined to the north and east, the rest of Sri Lanka escaping the brunt of the destruction. But war did periodically and violently shatter the surface calm of the port capital of Colombo. President Premadasa was killed in one bomb attack in 1991; more than 100 persons were killed and 1,300 wounded by a suicide bomber at the country's Central Bank in 1996; and fourteen persons were killed and several planes destroyed in a similar attack on the international airport two years ago.

Amidst today's big city bustle and renewed signs of optimism, physical scars are vivid reminders of the recent past: a line of gutted office buildings near the downtown naval headquarters; police and army posts, heavily sandbagged and ringed with barbed wire, maintain a wary vigilance at the airport and other key buildings; a machine gun post perched high above one downtown hotel scans the ocean. At hotel reception desks, collection boxes still urge clients:

"Help provide shelter for your brother

He has given his today for your tomorrow."

Most of an increasing number of tourists taking advantage of cheap package tours and the relative calm, head to the palm-fringed beaches south of Colombo, but the refugee story is due north. A narrow two-lane trunk road hugs the west coast of Sri Lanka to Puttalam district, an area of sweeping, shallow lagoons, salt pans, fishing boats and prawn farms. In more peaceful times this region, too, might be a popular tourist destination, but the only visitors in the last 15 years were tens of thousands of civilians fleeing the fighting further north.

The area's population doubled with the new arrivals. Dozens of welfare and relocation centers were established. Fleeing civilians were housed in mosques, schools and civic centers and private homes. Puttalam is not a wealthy area, but like many areas

IT WAS ONE OF THE FIRST TIMES THE AGENCY BECAME HEAVILY INVOLVED WITH INTERNALLY DISPLACED PERSONS IN SUCH LARGE NUMBERS.

around the world inundated with displaced persons, it has displayed both a remarkable tolerance and resilience in absorbing so many homeless civilians with so few resources.

Many of the displaced persons are Muslims from the Jaffna or Mannar regions further north who gravitated here because of the large number of local co-religionists. Some have already returned home. Others are more cautious, waiting to see if the peace lasts, wondering whether to settle here permanently and what awaits them, if anything at all, 'back

continued on page 14 ►

Life in the war zone

A grim new reality for humanitarians working at the center of Sri Lanka's conflict

Gregory Mariathas may not have been quite able to see the whites of the pilot's eyes, but the terrifying sight of the diving warplane was still close enough for him to read the lettering on its fuselage.

"I was lying on my side, looking up and was clearly able to read out the aircraft's identification marks in English," he said recently. "Then the plane released its bombs, right above my head it seemed at the time. I was sprayed with sand and debris. My hair and arms were burned. But luckily the jungle was so thick there I escaped further injury from the bombing."

Mariathas had been riding in a truck to a timber depot in Tamil-controlled territory in northern Sri Lanka when a marauding warplane zeroed in on an apparent target-of-opportunity and swooped to attack.

The incident highlighted a grim new reality for the small number of international and local humanitarian officials such as Mariathas involved in Sri Lanka's bitter civil conflict.

Until recent years, UNHCR officials had normally worked on the fringes of war, helping refugees stabilize and rebuild their lives once they had escaped from dangerous situations. Indeed, the refugee agency began operations in Sri Lanka in 1987 specifically to assist refugees to return from India during one early interlude in the war.

But when the conflict re-ignited through the 1990s and into the new millennium, field staff from UNHCR and a few other agencies such as the International Red Cross, were sucked inexorably into the eye of the inferno.

The refugee organization expanded its operations to assist not only refugees but also hundreds of thousands of civilians



Tamil returnees in 1995.

internally displaced on both sides of the front lines, in government and LTTE-held territory. In the swirl of battle, it provided a tenuous physical, legal and moral protection regime for terrified families. The agency became a mediator with the army and the LTTE high command, its field staff constantly walking the delicate tightrope between being trusted intermediaries or branded as suspected spies.

Staff and civilians became caught in the deadly crossfire of major firefights, frantic calls being exchanged between field offices, Colombo, Jaffna and rebel headquarters to arrange a hasty cease-fire allowing trapped people to escape. Convoys ferried

desperately needed emergency supplies across the front lines and through no man's land into the beleaguered rebel enclave. Vehicular movement was subject to sporadic surprise helicopter or warplane attack.

Field personnel were isolated for weeks or months in rebel-held territory or on the Jaffna Peninsula where often their only physical link with the outside world was a perilous night time boat ride between the peninsula and the east coast port of Trincomalee.

LOCAL BURDEN

The heaviest burden in this little reported and little known conflict inevitably fell on local staff who endured two long decades of conflict and whose own families were sometimes among the very civilians UNHCR was trying to help.

Amidst some of the worst fighting of the war in 1995, driver S.

Koneswaran remembers "the most horrible moments of my life" as he tried to flee Jaffna town and find a place of safety for his still trapped family. "Everyone was trying to leave.

There was a monstrous traffic jam," he remembers. "We were just moving along inch by inch. There was shelling and firing everywhere. So many people being killed and wounded. It took me two days to get out" and find a relatively safe area on the fringes of the battle.

Then he had to get back into Jaffna to bring his parents out. "The LTTE wouldn't let me through their lines. I had to work my way between the two armies, cutting through the rice paddies. I felt I was going to be shot by either side any moment."

At this time, government warplanes had improvised what to Koneswaran seemed like homemade bombs, effectively large oil



War destruction.

barrels filled with explosives which were rolled out of slow flying Russian built transport planes. “They spiralled down very slowly,” he said. “We could track them as they fell. During the day we could see them coming and run away. It was not so bad. But at night it was far worse, because we couldn’t see where they would land.”

One evening, as he stood outside his house in Jaffna, he heard the ominous rumble of ‘bombs’ falling. “I tried to jump a gate and head for an air raid shelter” which everyone had dug in their gardens, he said. He was lucky. He didn’t reach the bunker but the bomb exploded on the opposite side of the house, peppering the building but leaving him unscathed.

Another UNHCR worker, T. Kandasamy was not so lucky. He was also standing near his home during other fighting when he was hit in the stomach by shrapnel but he recovered.

UNHCR had established a series of so-called open relief centers for civilians—physically unprotected ‘safe’ sanctuaries which both sides had agreed to respect. Madhu in Sri Lanka’s northern Vanni region was the largest, at times housing many thousands of people, and driver S. Siebagnamam was helping to ferry supplies to the trapped civilians there.

“At this time the army was retreating and there was very heavy fighting,” he said. “It was raining heavily and it was very late at night when a shell struck the Catholic church. I was some yards away. Even above the rain and the gunfire I heard the crying and screaming. Everything was very confusing, but when I reached the building

there was blood everywhere. The walls were splattered and elsewhere blood was flowing like a river. The people were milling around terrified, but they couldn’t go anywhere because there was fighting in all directions.”

It was one of the worst tragedies of its kind in the war and nearly 50 people died.

UNDER SIEGE

And then there were the ‘routine’ incidents of life in a war zone—the lack of communications with the outside world, the lack of information, of transport, petrol, food or medicine.

“Malaria was very bad at the time,” Gregory Mariathas remembers. “We all got it

Nimal Peiris had already fled the chaos to India during the early part of the war and then returned home where he eventually became an interpreter and protection clerk for UNHCR on Mannar Island—a major exit point on Sri Lanka’s west coast for civilians fleeing to India and the scene of major fighting. Even today some stretches of the island remain devastated.

He remembers the “motorcycle incident” vividly. He was riding with a colleague on a UNHCR motorcycle when two armed LTTE fighters stopped them and one demanded the bike. “I refused and told them ‘if you want this bike then shoot me,’” he said. “For 45 minutes he held a pistol to my head,

“THE WALLS WERE SPLATTERED AND ELSEWHERE BLOOD WAS FLOWING LIKE A RIVER. THE PEOPLE WERE MILLING AROUND TERRIFIED, BUT THEY COULDN’T GO ANYWHERE BECAUSE THERE WAS FIGHTING IN ALL DIRECTIONS.”

repeatedly, sometimes when we were driving in convoy. My colleagues would strap me into a seat with a belt and we would carry on, with me shivering away.”

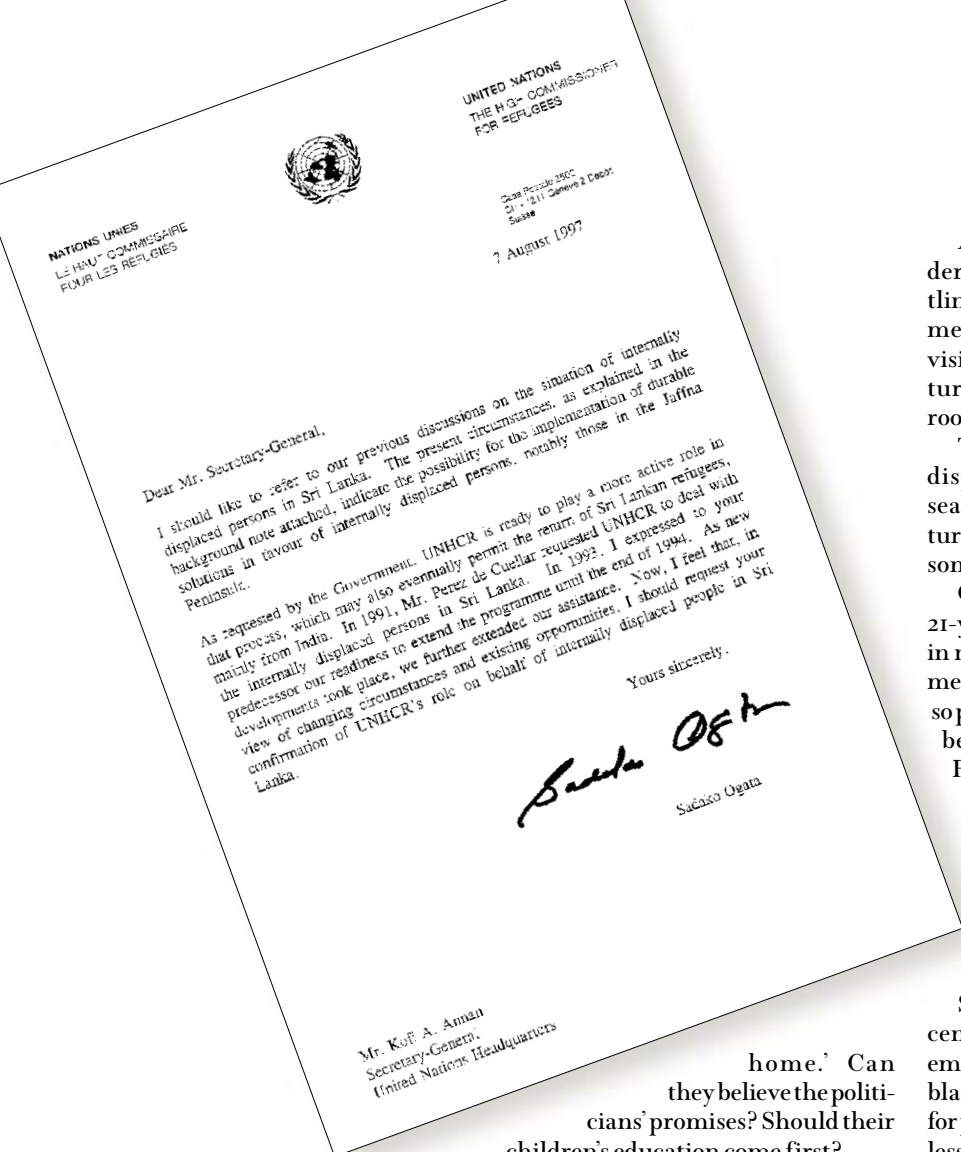
As one recent visitor was being driven to Mannar Island, the local UNHCR driver remarked almost matter of factly: “That used to be my home” pointing to a semi-destroyed building now in the middle of a small military compound. “We had to get out during the fighting. We have found somewhere else.”

arguing. Eventually the second man freed us.”

The cycle was donated to a local organization, but the persistent guerrilla eventually commandeered it. Three months later Peiris again saw the man and the motorcycle.

After a formal complaint, the machine was returned and the man arrested by his own high command for the robbery and other crimes.

Even minor successes like that were welcome in the chaos of war. ■



home.’ Can they believe the politicians’ promises? Should their children’s education come first?

DASHED HOPES

Like all uprooted peoples, each individual relates heart-rending stories of violent upheaval, the hope of immediate return and then the despair of long exile. Fifty-seven-year-old Abdul Hameed Badurdeen was part of Jaffna’s thriving Muslim community with a home on the main thoroughfare, Moor Street, when

“THE REPATRIATION OPERATION IN SRI LANKA SKATES ON A GLASSY POND, AND THE PIROUETTES AND ARABESQUES THAT WE GO THROUGH BEAR NO RESEMBLANCE TO THOSE IN ANY OTHER UNHCR PROGRAM.”

one day in October 1990, the community was destroyed. All the Muslims were summoned to a local school, given just two hours notice to leave and with virtually no possessions or money, bused into exile. “We were told we might be back in two days,” he recalls ruefully. “Thirteen years later and we are still not home.” Refugees worldwide are often told by their tormentors or wrap themselves in self-delusion that their exile will be fleeting, but the reality is often very different.

Abdul Hameed Badurdeen and his family wandered the country as nomads for years before settling in Puttalam. Since the cease-fire, community members have returned to Jaffna on exploratory visits but as one said, “What would you do if you returned and found a tree growing in your old living room and the rest of the house destroyed?”

There is a constant tug-of-war in the gut of all displaced persons between hope and fear, a deep seated desire to return to the ancestral hearth or to turn one’s back on a dreadful past and begin life afresh somewhere else.

Often the wanderlust is strongest in the young, but 21-year-old Liyakath Aikhan Mohammed Aslam is in no doubt: “I was seven when I fled. I can’t even remember anything about my own village. But I will be so proud when I return there,” he said. When will that be? “Oh, in a few days. Or maybe in a few years.” Followed by a fatalistic shrug.

For now he lives in Kuringipitty, a tiny hamlet of nearly 200 displaced persons at the head of a lagoon. He is clearly very bright and clever, but because of his nomadic existence, he has had no formal education and cannot read or write.

His future looks bleak even if the peace becomes permanent.

Several homes in Kuringipitty burned down recently, and on this visit a UNHCR team drops off emergency supplies—plastic buckets, sleeping mats, blankets. Each package is worth a little over \$40, but for people with nothing, even this modest help is priceless.

Protection work—the core of UNHCR’s mandate—is both labor intensive and basic. It may take a full day or even longer for a team to visit a few people in an isolated community.

A check list: Do they have basic shelter, water and a little medicine? Are they being harassed by the locals or military? Has the school reopened? Is there any work or income support? Help may be needed to resolve land and home ownership problems. Ensuring that if people do go home, they do so voluntarily and once there enjoy their basic human rights. Has the only access road to the village destroyed during the fighting been repaired? Have there been any recent incidents of child abductions? If UNHCR officials cannot help directly, liaise with local government officials or another organization to provide a clinic or school books. One thousand and one mundane tasks.

EYE OF THE STORM

Moving north, the signs of war and its destructive aftermath proliferate. When the guns fell silent in late 2001, the LTTE controlled a 100 kilometer



Cleaning up after the guns fall silent

It was surely one of the most bizarre sights of the war. “I was in Mannar district when I saw a small and rather strange herd of cattle,” recalls Luke Atkinson of the Norwegian People’s Aid group. “On closer inspection, I noticed that most of the cows were three legged. They had each had one leg blown off by mines.

“The farmer had kept them alive by binding their wounds but he appealed to me, ‘What can I do with these three-legged cattle? What can I do?’”

Atkinson is a de-mining consultant helping to train a cadre of 600 field staff for the Humanitarian De-mining Unit (HDU), an organization responsible for cleaning up the Tamil Tiger-controlled areas of Sri Lanka. The army and other international groups are working in government-controlled areas.

Regions emerging from long conflicts—Cambodia, the Balkans, Angola, Afghanistan—all face a lingering nightmare legacy of war including minefields, booby traps and unexploded military ordnance such as bombs and shells.

And though the encounter with the crippled herd of cattle had an almost tragicomic element, it underlined in a peculiarly poignant way a similar physical threat facing Sri Lanka’s returning civilians, their livestock and their ability to rebuild shattered local communities.

The army laid more than one million mines during the two-decade long war, the LTTE a smaller but unknown number. The military recently agreed to share with civilian de-miners precise maps of their minefields, a move Atkinson said would be invaluable in reducing the inevitable number of casualties and

UNHCR/R. WILKINSON/CS/LKA/2003



Mine clearing and mine awareness in Sri Lanka’s Vanni region.

speeding up de-mining activities.

The consultant said he was already impressed with the discipline shown by many returnees who had moved back into their old homes, but had resisted the temptation to venture into uncleared and potentially lethal farmland just a few yards away.

RISKY WORK

Still, the situation remained highly dangerous, both for the mine clearers and civilians.

One six-man team was recently at work on the shoulder of the country’s main north-south artery, the A9 truck road. To the untrained eye, its method of operation appeared

basic, even primitive and fraught with risk. Each de-miner was dressed loosely in flimsy rubber wellingtons (gumshoes) which offer little protection against unexploded material, flak jacket, visor and white hardhat.

Their gear was recently upgraded, according to the team leader directing operations through a bullhorn as the men spaced themselves at 15 meter intervals and began work. Traffic rumbled by a few feet away. A beautifully dressed woman in heels walked daintily by, seemingly unconcerned about any imminent surprise.

The de-miners were each armed with an unsophisticated, long-handled and rusting garden rake with which they vigorously combed and then cleared the underbrush. The leader insisted to a skeptical visitor that the rake strokes were too light to trigger any lurking mines, but would merely uncover them after which they could be detonated on the spot or made safe and removed.

Each 30 minutes the teams were changed to allow the men to rehydrate with huge gulps of water. In one day each de-miner cleared just a few square yards. Each earned 7,000 rupees (\$80) per month, a good salary in Sri Lanka, and the work will certainly last for several years.

But even though the problem here may not be quite as dangerous as in places like Angola, the toll is still enormous. An estimated 1,000 persons were killed or injured since civilians began returning home in large numbers. In one particularly tragic incident a de-miner blew himself up when he mistakenly sat on a mine which had only been unearthed a few minutes earlier. ■

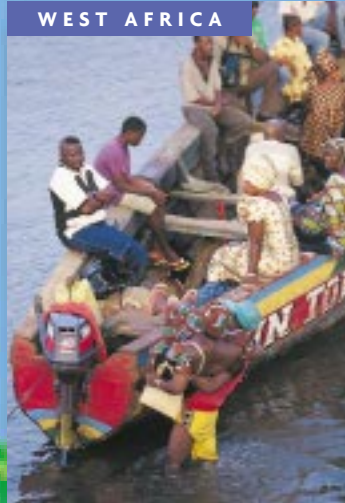
WORLD



UNHCR/8 PRESS/CS/RENT/1999

8 There are more than 40 million uprooted persons around the world—refugees, asylum seekers, civilians internally displaced within their own countries. More than half this total—around 20 million people—are children and youths—the group aged between 13 and 25. This year's World Refugee Day on June 20 will celebrate these young people—not only their special problems, such as these deaf Sudanese refugees, but also their exceptional promise if given an opportunity to escape a life in exile and obtain an education.

WEST AFRICA



UNHCR/21 BEHRING/CS/LBR/2003

6 It was a case of exchanging one hell for another. As widespread unrest continued in the West African state of Côte d'Ivoire this spring, more than 80,000 Liberian refugees and Ivorian citizens fled westwards for safety in, of all countries, Liberia. Meanwhile, as a three-year insurgency intensified in western Liberia itself, a new wave of refugees poured into the next country, Sierra Leone, which itself is trying to recover from a decade-long civil war. In the last two years around 60,000 Liberians sought sanctuary in Sierra Leone in a dizzying round of refugee musical chairs.

6

COLOMBIA



UNHCR/P. SMITH/CS/COI-2003

7

7 The worst humanitarian crisis in the western hemisphere continued to intensify into the new year, particularly around Colombia's border areas, even though the government held negotiations with some paramilitary and rebel groups on demobilization and peace talks. In the nearly four decades of conflict, an estimated two million civilians were displaced within the country. UNHCR has helped by beginning to register these civilians.

ANGOLA



UNHCR/CS/ATLEBERGER/CS/AGO-1994

5 The war in Angola lasted for a quarter of a century. Hundreds of thousands of persons were probably killed in the conflict. More than four million persons were ripped from their towns and villages, seeking safety either inside the ravaged African nation or in surrounding countries. Many people have already gingerly begun returning home (picture shows a feeding center) following a cease-fire signed last year between the government and UNITA rebels and as in Sri Lanka, this trend is expected to continue this year... as long as the guns of war remain silent.

RWANDA



UNHCR/L. TAYLOR/CS/TZA-2002

4 Rwanda's genocide in 1994 was the world's worst killing field. It resulted in the exodus of more than two million people from the nation. In the intervening decade, many have returned to the country. But efforts are now under way to help with their homecoming. An estimated 60,000 refugees in surrounding countries are expected to return home. Arrangements should be agreed with the government.



AFGHANISTAN

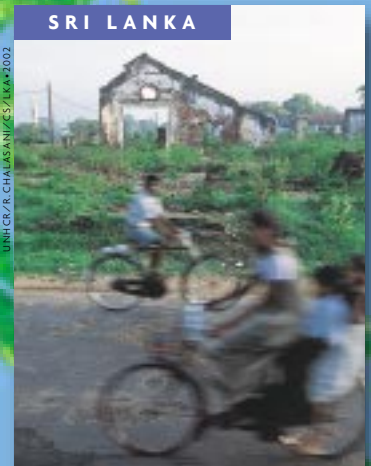


UNHCR/N. BEHRING/DFP/ATG-2002

1 After a break because of the harsh winter conditions, the large-scale repatriation of Afghan civilians back to their homes has restarted. UNHCR expects to assist around 1.2 million refugees and a further 300,000 internally displaced persons, helping them to reconstruct their homes and restart their lives. It has asked for a budget of \$195 million. Last year, more than two million people returned.

1

SRI LANKA



UNHCR/R. CHALASANIC/S/LEA-2002

2 After nearly two decades of civil war, a cease-fire to end one of the world's longest conflicts continues to hold. More than a quarter of a million internally displaced persons and hundreds of refugees have already returned home following an agreement signed in early 2002. The pace is expected to continue through this year with refugee returns from India gaining momentum. An estimated 65,000 persons were killed in the conflict, more than one million people were uprooted and hundreds of villages and towns destroyed.

2

KENYA



UNHCR/B. PRESS/CS/KEN-2002

3 It will be the largest ever refugee resettlement program undertaken out of Africa. After final vetting, the first of around 12,000 so-called Somali Bantu people will begin a journey out of exile shortly—from a refugee camp in northern Kenya to new homes across the breadth of the United

States. The Bantu, a distinctive group of people who were originally slaved from southern Africa in the 18th and 19th centuries to Somalia, fled when that country collapsed in the early 1990s. For a decade, the U.N. refugee agency tried to find them refuge in their ancestral homes, but when those efforts failed, the United States agreed to accept them for resettlement as a special group.

3

4

5

4 triggered not only one of the darkest periods in modern history, but also a mass exodus of people from that landlocked African nation. In the aftermath, the majority of civilians returned to Rwanda. The process is underway to finalize the Rwandan genocide. Some 100,000 Rwandans continue to live as refugees in neighboring countries including Zambia where some 5,000 are expected to return in the coming months. Similar arrangements are being made with other nations throughout 2003.

ON THE MEND

deep swath of jungle, east to west, known as the Vanni, isolating from the rest of the country the vital government-controlled northernmost Jaffna Peninsula, the crown jewel which the two sides had duelled over.

The A9 trunk road cleanly bisects the north of the island, running south to north, slicing through the government front lines into the heart of the Vanni region and snaking into Jaffna town. It had been dubbed the Highway of Death during the war and even in more peaceful times is a useful barometer of the country's health.

The military tried to choke this rump Tamil state of Vanni during the war by imposing both a military and economic blockade on the region, but

“WE WERE TOLD WE MIGHT BE BACK IN TWO DAYS. THIRTEEN YEARS LATER AND WE ARE STILL NOT HOME.”



A Sinhalese returnee farmer.

some emergency humanitarian supplies for the civilian population were allowed through. Field officer Kilian Kleinschmidt recalled the extreme tension and danger of running a convoy through no man's land between the opposing armies in 1997:

“Boy, it's hot—45 or 50 Celsius, but who cares? Who dares to breathe anyway?”

Pitch dark—there is the abandoned farm half way; the little Hindu shrine where truck drivers pray during the day crossing no man's land.

The palm trees with their tops shot away by artillery.

Big Dany driver is so quiet, hiding behind his wheel and driving so slowly—crawling, inching. Waiting for the bang which will tell us, for a fraction of a second, that the mine has got us and we will never make it home.

No time to write a last letter; no time to cry and scream. Advancing carefully—500, 400, 300, 200, 100 yards. Made it all the way back to where we had started. Totally wet. Wrecked.

Greeted by this little black clothed fighter at the rebel checkpoint.

My decision to try to get back from rebel territory through the front lines. Didn't my friend the brigadier promise to let me 'in' even at night?

Didn't I tell my friend, the rebel checkpoint commander, that we would be allowed to cross by the army?

Didn't he reply that if our convoy crossed there would be no return—he would mine the no man's land for the night, attack any moving object?

The army didn't open the barrier. We had to return through no man's land.

The mine didn't rip us into little chunks. They didn't shoot.

Safety.”

PROGRESS

When the A9 was reopened for civilian traffic early last year, it was the most tangible sign of progress. The embargo on such sensitive items as cement has been gradually lifted and prices in the enclave, once prohibitive for virtually everything, are now on a par with the rest of the country. Traffic volume has increased and modern Japanese trucks joust with World War II vintage Morris Minors and Austin cars for bragging rights on the crumbling highway. Burned out armored personnel carriers still litter the shoulders but de-miners in rubber galoshes and visors sweep for mines and unexploded ordnance with garden rakes. An ambitious plan is on the drawing boards to rebuild this vital artery.

But to travel on the A9 one enters a twilight zone between war and peace and two nations, the Sinhalese land of Buddhists and a Tamil-controlled territory of Hindus. The two armies are on stand down but eye each other warily. The LTTE has established its own police force, court system and tax authority, though many civilians say the collection of taxes amounts to

nothing more than a crude shakedown. The Vanni even operates in a different time zone, 30 minutes behind national time.

In a great swirl of movement, a partial reordering of the civilian landscape, tens of thousands of displaced civilians have returned to the Vanni region or have left it for the densely populated Jaffna region as have other groups from Colombo and Puttalam.

Off the main highway, monsoon rains have washed away bridges and rural roads. There has been no maintenance for two decades. The jungle encroaches on everything.

Deep in the interior at Murippu village, protection officer Kahin Ismail checks on the progress of nine Muslim families who returned last year. The news is good. There has been no harassment. Tamil neighbors loaned one family money to buy nets and a fishing boat and an elder tells visitors, "Even if I die, I will die here happily."

"So far," according to Ismail "most of the returnees are people with nothing to lose. Those with businesses or homes elsewhere are holding back, waiting to see what happens. But the authorities here are handling the returnees with kid gloves." He added, "I spend maybe 50 percent of my time monitoring civilians like today. The rest involves helping to solve problems like land disputes. Soon UNHCR will also begin monitoring a government program to assist families returning to their original homes with cash grants.

Further along the rutted track lies Mullativu. Government soldiers and rebels fought one of the biggest pitched battles of the war here in the mid-1990s. Hundreds were killed. The town is still a wreck. Two rusting freighters captured by the LTTE and sunk by government warplanes scar the beach. It may take years to breathe the new life into this town.

In contrast, Kilinochchi, a non-descript center sitting astride the A9, which has become the LTTE administrative capital, is bustling with energy. Offices are being rebuilt, shops opening and returning civilians cobbling together simple huts on the outskirts of town.

Heading towards Jaffna, the A9 has become a different kind of battleground for the hearts and minds of the country's civilian population. Every few kilometers, gaudy, hand painted billboards extol the bravery of Tamil martyrs though the accompanying English translations are somewhat convoluted:

*"In the entrance of enemy
The life in prison will get lightness
If we are strong*

*In the earth without barriers
Braveness blooms when we left."*

Across another front line and into army-controlled territory and a black and yellow banner proclaims



UNHCR/R. CHALASANI/DP/LKA-2002

UNHCR is upgrading the level of psychiatric treatment available to returning civilians.

"Highway for Unity and Peace." At every war-scarred bridge, a government notice instructs the public that it had been destroyed by Tamil fighters. Both sides are

A LONE SAILING VESSEL ANCHORED AND UNLOADED PILES OF RIPE MANGOES, SUITCASES, FISHING NETS, A BICYCLE, AND A LOUDLY BLEATING BLACK GOAT. IT WAS THE FIRST TIME CIVILIANS HAD BEEN ALLOWED TO SAIL BACK TO THEIR OLD HOMES.

keeping their options open, reminding their respective publics of the sacrifices they made during the war.

ULTIMATE PRIZE

Once the jewel of Tamil culture, the peninsula was the ultimate prize, the center of the military storm where many thousands of persons died in set piece battles and the bulk of the civilian population uprooted from their homes.

Much of the mainland, lagoons and islands remain *continued on page 22* ►

Death, despair... and then hope

*For the handful of humanitarian officials working on both sides of the Sri Lanka conflict during the late 1990s, life was a daily, dangerous tightrope, as they tried to convince soldiers and rebels alike to respect a beleaguered civilian population, at the same time maintaining the trust of suspicious commanders, negotiating the front lines with emergency supplies and crossing a scary no man's land where anything could happen. When **Kilian Kleinschmidt** was a senior field officer in the northern town of Vavuniya in 1996-97, the war seemed so hopelessly bogged down, even aid officials wondered why they were there.*



UNHCR/R. WILKINSON/CS/LKA-2003

The rusting weapons of war.

A few bloodstains in the dust, household belongings scattered around the little mud house 200 yards from the main junction in Mankulam. A plastic wall clock smashed, indicating the time of death of the old man who was killed instantly by shrapnel from a shell which hit this strategic junction in one of the so-called 'uncleared areas' in the north of the country.

Never mind: another useless death, more hatred and more displacement as hundreds of families leave the same night on overburdened ox-carts or little tractors, past 'heroes cemetery' where rebels have buried their fighters, and into the jungle which offers a little cover, water and snakes. Don't bother

building another hut. Some civilians out of the hundreds of thousands who have been displaced, have done this 10 times, 20 times already, but the war always catches up with them and repeats the cycle.

It begins with a peaceful village. But then there is the dreadful intrusion: bombardment, attack, scare, flight; finding a new place, building a house, starting a garden, bombardment, attack, scare, flight... The shelling of Mankulam is just a minor incident on the wider stage of an unending war between government and rebel forces.

Why should we even bother about this forgotten conflict? But then there are no other witnesses; maybe 10 international staff working in the rebel-controlled area. So we feel responsible—we are responsible—for protecting the innocent, constructing a credible account of the situation, trying to maintain the delicate balance of trust with both sides, convincing the commanders perhaps that their military operations could be driving the civilians-caught-in-the-middle into the opposite camp. We owe it to the dead old man of Mankulam and especially the survivors.

Once back in government territory, I urge my army interlocutor, a brigadier, that bombs such as those which fell on Mankulam do not necessarily win hearts and minds. Without trying to interfere with military operations,

couldn't we agree that the army will advance along the main road and we can group civilians in the jungles left and right? Yes we can. But can we for our part guarantee there will be no rebel cadres among these families? No we can't. The dialogue continues.

Later, there is a similar exchange with officials of the rebel LTTE: on civilian rights versus 'the cause' and military strategy, how to get civilians out of the way of the fighting, freedom of movement. I sit on the same sofa set, a familiar prop which has been transported with the constantly moving war headquarters from place to place in the rebel enclave during these endless discussions. We disagree on many things but do concur jokingly that when peace breaks out the excellent rebel logisticians will easily be able to find new employment.

Each side is kept closely informed about these meetings 'on the other side' of the front lines. Transparency is our only weapon in holding their trust and allowing us to continue working.

CROSSING THE LINE

The Captain of Ramya House, the last military checkpoint between the government-held territory and rebel-controlled Vanni region, is our 'most beloved enemy.' We get along... kind of... but his job is to make it as dif-



A UNHCR food convoy in no man's land.

difficult as possible for humanitarian workers and their emergency supplies to reach the enclave. We meet almost every day and the routine is always the same. Verification of permits. The physical scrutiny of goods. Yet another piece of paper for one thousand blankets, 10 bales of used clothes and cooking utensils. Other permits for new tires, one bag of cement and one jerrican of fuel for the UNHCR field office.

Is he in a good mood? An enthusiastic movement of the head from right to left means yes—a hesitant shaking means that we will see. No movement at all and some frowns on his forehead mean a clear no! A telephone call to the Brigadier or Headquarters in Colombo may mean no departure today. Come back tomorrow at which time you will need a new movement permit from the capital.

Will he order the used clothes to be sorted by individual colors? Camouflage is refused. Ten bottles of shampoo are confiscated. The shampoo could be used as engine oil. AA sized batteries are verboten, since they could be inserted in mines. The one bag of cement for a new UNHCR base camp? Not today, despite a permit. It could be used to construct a rebel bunker.

A body being repatriated from Sweden in a sealed coffin must be searched for restricted items and weaponry—by hand and metal de-

tor. The checking officers visibly recoil and cover their noses as they open the zinc coffin—but restricted items have been discovered before in the most unlikely places.

The convoy proceeds cautiously into the 2000-yard no man's land between the military and rebel checkpoints. Blue flashlights revolve from the vehicles roofs, alerting everyone to our presence.

The lid of the coffin from Sweden bounces

“WHY SHOULD WE EVEN BOTHER ABOUT THIS FORGOTTEN CONFLICT? BUT THEN THERE ARE NO OTHER WITNESSES. WE ARE RESPONSIBLE FOR PROTECTING THE INNOCENT.”

open. Bunkers built from smashed palm trees, mud and sand line the route. There are soldiers dressed in flip-flops, green t-shirts and boxer shorts, rifles thumping against their backs. Heavy rails which formed the country's major rail link which were ripped up to act as crash barriers, must be physically manhandled aside. A government convoy of 40-50 trucks with essential commodities moves through. It is a true oddity of this war that even as both sides try to kill each other, Colombo has decided to keep feeding the rebel pocket, civilians and LTTE fighters alike.

The transfer of dead soldiers and rebels is often made in this dangerous no man's land, but sometimes even this poignantly tragic act of kindness can have a grisly end. A truck loaded with corpses from a recent battle arrives. Access to cross the front lines is denied because the arrival of so many dead bodies would be an acute embarrassment and public relations disaster. Even the checkpoint commandant has tears in his eyes. The bodies will

find no permanent resting place, but will simply be listed as missing in action.

A seemingly endless and hopeless war continued on its way.

Epilogue: One paragraph appears in a European newspaper about the peace process in Sri Lanka. There is also a 30-second television report. My LTTE 'colleagues' shake hands with a government delegation in a process brokered by the Norwegians. But didn't we discuss this in 1996 and 1997? and the idea went nowhere then. But good news at last. ■

ON THE MEND

in ruins, heavily fortified with bunkers, berms and barbed wire.

Professor Thaya Sumasundaram of Jaffna University's Faculty of Medicine, says the psychological damage suffered by the population may be even greater. "Where are we on the ladder compared with, say, Cambodia or Bosnia?" the professor, who worked extensively in Cambodia, asked rhetorically. "It became very bad here and had the war carried on much longer we would have hit rock bottom—just like Cambodia."

He added, "The ages-old social net is no longer there to protect society. The role of women has changed dramatically. Elders have lost their legitimacy and young people their inhibitions. We can't go back to the old ways, that's for sure, but if there is one glimmer of hope it is that some important structures have not been completely wiped out."

But as the crush of returning people mounts, the army has gradually reduced the size of its formerly out-of-bounds high security zones. Some reconstruction, including work on a sparkling white library, is underway. Civilian flights have resumed to the once isolated pocket. Ferry services may get underway soon, facilitating the return of refugees from India.

It is a modest beginning. Moor Street, the home of nearly 4,000 Muslim families before the war, including Abdul Hameed Badurdeen quoted earlier in this

report, remains gutted and apparently empty.

One man poked around a ruined home. He told a visitor during a chance meeting he had returned that very day to assess the damage and decide whether to bring his family back. Attracted by the conversation, other Muslims emerged from the shadows and sought reassurance from UNHCR protection officer Rafael Abis about the future.

"When we came here a month ago, there was no activity at all. Nothing. Nobody," he said. "This is progress. It is slow, but it is progress."

There was another encouraging encounter at Manddaitivu village on one of the outlying areas the same day. While Abis discussed with recently returned Catholics the possibility of removing rolls of barbed wire from the beaches, a lone sailing vessel anchored and unloaded piles of building poles, ripe mangoes, suitcases, pots and pans, kettles, fishing nets, a bicycle and finally a loudly bleating black goat.

It was the first time returning civilians had been allowed to sail back to their old homes rather than going via the heavily guarded highway.

"Another small first," said Abis. As if to emphasize how peaceful and even 'normal' the situation appeared, off duty sailors enjoyed a game of cricket in the afternoon heat nearby, the lazy thwack of a ball on bat making war and destruction at that moment seem a long way off. ■

OFF THE MAIN HIGHWAY, MONSOON RAINS HAVE WASHED AWAY BRIDGES AND RURAL ROADS. THERE HAS BEEN NO MAINTENANCE FOR TWO DECADES. THE JUNGLE ENCROACHES ON EVERYTHING.



Rebuilding Jaffna.

Rwanda: looking
to the future.

Growing PAINS

*Young people should be preparing for adulthood;
instead, they are trapped in the limbo of exile*

AT A TIME WHEN THEY SHOULD BE HONING THEIR SOCIAL, EDUCATIONAL AND SEXUAL PERSONAS, THEY FIND THEMSELVES CAUGHT IN A TERRIBLE LIMBO OF EXILE... IGNORED, EXPLOITED OR CONDEMNED TO A LIFE WITHOUT HOPE.



Golden childhood memories have crumbled into nightmare. If prompted, 24-year-old Arami remembers her family's "lovely villa, and as a young girl playing with my friends in the small beautiful garden" in Somalia. Her recent memories, however, are dominated by thoughts of "my father being killed in a massacre" during the country's civil war and her subsequent flight into exile. "We had to run away in our pyjamas. We couldn't think of taking anything with us."

Teenagers Bolleh and Emmanuel recall singing and dancing with their friends on the beaches around Monrovia, the capital of Liberia, selling jeans in a downtown shop and just 'hanging out' as youngsters do. Until they were kidnapped by one of the country's rebel groups as child soldiers, brainwashed that "Death is better than life" and forced to both fight and sometimes execute opposing guerrillas in cold blood.

Layla was happiest visiting "a little mosque where I could speak with God alone and in peace. It had beautiful, gold-framed windows through which I could see



UNICEF/G.PIROZZI/BW/AGO-1996



Youngsters were forcibly recruited to fight in Angola's quarter century civil war, but education is the way forward.

the mountains and the running water.” The 13-year-old had been born in exile in Iran after her family fled neighboring Afghanistan as that country collapsed. But there would be no happy homecoming for this youngster and her family. Fearing they might be forcibly deported back to Afghanistan from their adopted homeland, they moved instead to the west and eventually ended up in Greece where they sought asylum.

Fate has played a particularly cruel trick on Arami, Bolleh, Emmanuel and Layla and millions of others

like them around the world.

At a critical time of ‘growing up’ when they should be honing their social, educational and sexual personas ready for an adult future, young people find themselves caught instead in a terrible limbo of exile where they can be alternately ignored, exploited or condemned to a life without hope.

GLOBALLY DISPLACED

There are more than 40 million uprooted persons around the world—refugees, asylum seekers, civilians

“IF YOUNG PEOPLE ARE LEFT ON SOCIETY’S MARGINS, ALL OF US WILL BE IMPOVERISHED.”

internally displaced within their own countries and other groups.

More than half of this global total—around 20 million people—are children and what is loosely termed ‘young people’, though the exact number of this latter group is difficult to accurately assess. The very concept of ‘youth’ varies according to national cultures and different organizations set arbitrary age limits to delineate the boundaries between children, youths and adults.

In general, UNHCR considers anyone between the ages of 13 and 25 to be young refugees. To highlight not only their special problems, but also their exceptional promise, the agency dedicated this year’s World Refugee Day on June 20, to refugee youth and a series of special concerts, cultural festivals, public debates and religious services around the world were planned.

All uprooted peoples are in need of assistance. But

HCR’s own Policy on Refugee Children.

Despite this patchwork protection, it has become increasingly clear that these young people also faced particular pressures—physical, educational, economic and sexual—which needed to be specifically addressed.

CHILDREN OF WAR

One of the worst fates befalling disenfranchised young people is their forcible recruitment as child soldiers. The U.N. estimated that more than 300,000 underage youths, most of them between 15 and 17, currently are fighting in some of the world’s most brutal wars, undergoing indescribable experiences. In Sierra Leone’s recent civil war teenage soldiers were sometimes forced to kill their own parents and neighbors as part of gruesome indoctrination ceremonies or to deliberately mutilate other victims. Young females were reduced to the role of sex slaves, servicing dozens of partners.

These youngsters became little more than highly dangerous zombies who, even if they survived and then escaped the war, were in need of months or years of specialized care.

In addition to international political pressure on warring factions, regular armies and rebels alike, to eliminate underage recruitment, agencies throughout the humanitarian spectrum also began psychological, family reunion, educational and vocational programs to try to salvage damaged victims like 15-year-old Jonathan in Sierra Leone.

“They gave me guerrilla training. They gave me a gun,” the still traumatized youth explained in a monotone during his rehabilitation program. Did he take drugs? “Yes.” Did he kill people? “Lots.” Was that wrong? “It was just war, what I did then. I only took orders.” And what does he want to do now? Chillingly his response was, “Join the military. I know what to do there.”

Forcible recruitment and sexual slavery may be a young girl’s worst nightmare, but even if they escape that fate the threat of other sexual violence is always present in a refugee climate where social and family structures have collapsed. Girls are seen as ‘easy targets’ in refugee camps, becoming victims of outright rape or coercion. Some are forced into prostitution or to bestow ‘favors’ on powerful men such as camp leaders or teachers, merely to survive.

WIDESPREAD HARASSMENT

“Forty to 60 percent of sexual assaults are against girls below the age of 16,” says Linnie Kesselly, a community services officer in Uganda. “Girls and women are deceived and sexually used because they don’t know their rights and because they can’t sustain themselves financially.”

Like 22-year-old Mariama who admitted to sleeping with a string of men after being ditched by her regular boyfriend, sometimes for one night, sometimes for a couple of weeks, for as little as five Liberian dol-



UNHCR/R. CHALASANI/CCS/USA/2002

Unexploded ordnance is a particular danger to youngsters including this Sri Lankan returnee who was wounded by a land mine in his garden.

as their numbers grew inexorably in the decades following World War II, it became increasingly clear to agencies like UNHCR that particular groups such as women, children or the elderly, needed different types of help within a general humanitarian framework. Special programs and international conventions were established to meet those needs.

There were no such particular accords for youth who, instead, were covered by more general programs and treaties such as the 1951 Refugee Convention, its 1967 Protocol, the 1989 Convention on the Rights of the Child and various optional protocols and UN-

lars (10 cents). “I never wanted that life,” she said with resignation, “but there is no other way to survive.”

When 18-year-old Musu from Sierra Leone applied for a school scholarship, a teacher on the interviewing committee asked her to be his girlfriend. “I told him I didn’t want to be his friend,” she remembers. “I never did get that scholarship.”

In such a threatening and permissive environment lacking all normal social constraints, health problems proliferate. Sexually transmitted infections, including HIV/AIDS, have become commonplace among both sexes. Young women face early and unwanted pregnancies, unsafe abortions or high levels of maternal deaths and, in some parts of the world even in supervised camps, ongoing genital mutilation.

A variety of approaches has been adopted to try to combat sexual exploitation and the resultant health problems.

One common sense approach has been to improve basic security with better housing, lighting and more accessible public amenities in camps which may house tens or hundreds of thousands of people, reducing the opportunity for rape. Girls are educated about both the physical and health dangers as are key male figures such as camp leaders who may not appreciate or be willing to tackle the problems faced by their womenfolk. The more economically self-sufficient young women also become, having a skill or a trade, the less vulnerable and dependent they are to exploitation.

Youth clubs play an important role in promoting safety, education and community values. A group called Olympic Aid has sent qualified coaches to camps in eight countries to establish sports programs which will further the drive to help young people lead both more productive and healthier lives and also help eliminate one of the major curses of camp life—crushing boredom.

In addition to regular health programs including the construction of more clinics and educational projects, in East Africa UNHCR began an innovative HIV/AIDS prevention and response program to meet that particular challenge.

EDUCATION KEY

Education is perhaps the single, key element in helping young people escape from the trap of exile and poverty. But in no other field is the dilemma facing this particular group of refugees so starkly highlighted.

Schooling is expensive, difficult and politically contentious. When refugees arrive in a particular location, how long are they going to stay? Since it is always hoped, at least initially, that they will return home quickly, when should efforts begin to educate their children?

Such questions can produce inertia over what, after all, is a basic human right. But agencies helping refugees have patched together a system in which

UNHCR/P. SMITH/C.S./C01-2002



Colombian youngsters uprooted from their homes learn to enjoy life again.

many youngsters can now get at least a primary education. But there is little formal access to secondary or university courses for several million young people.

Twenty-two-year-old Ahmad’s fondest childhood memories are of school. “I used to love going to school in Somalia,” he said. “I was happy. We had good teachers.” Now, all he knows is that in exile in Cairo “I don’t go to school. I can’t afford the school fees. I can barely make my living.”

To mark the 50th anniversary of UNHCR, former High Commissioner Sadako Ogata in December 2000 established the Refugee Education Trust to provide secondary education for some of the 1.5 million teenage refugees in developing countries. Currently, only around three percent of them have access to post-primary courses.

It is a modest contribution to a generation of young people who should be preparing for leadership roles in tomorrow’s generation, but risk becoming today’s ‘lost generation.’

UNHCR has also been running a Peace Education program for several years in East and West Africa which gives young refugees, both in and out of school, the opportunity of learning skills to help prevent or minimize conflicts.

With help, they should be the key to tomorrow. They can play not only a vital role during their exile, helping to support the nuclear family or participating actively in refugee camp life, but also rebuilding local communities and nations when they return home.

“Young people should be at the forefront of global change and innovation,” according to U.N. Secretary-General Kofi Annan. “They can be key agents for development and peace.” But, he warned, “If they are left on society’s margins, all of us will be impoverished.”

Too many youths are still languishing in that twilight world despite recent attempts to alleviate their plight. ■

THIS GENERATION OF YOUNG PEOPLE SHOULD BE PREPARING FOR LEADERSHIP ROLES IN THE NEXT GENERATION, BUT RISK BECOMING TODAY’S ‘LOST GENERATION.’

“Peace and closure”



UNHCR/MICROBAYASHI/IDN1999

Helping Timor refugees go home.

High Commissioner Ruud Lubbers called it the “darkest period” in UNHCR’s history. On September 6, 2000, a mob of East Timorese militias supporting integration with Indonesia attacked

the agency’s office in the West Timor town of Atambua. Three staff were brutally murdered and their bodies burned: Carlos Caceres-Collazo, 33, an American citizen; Samson Aregahegn, 44, from Ethiopia and Pero Simundza, 29, from Croatia. It was the worst single attack against agency staff since its inception in 1950. Earlier this year, Mrs. Josefa Collazo, the mother of Carlos Caceres-Collazo, visited Dili, the capital of the new nation of East Timor and Atambua town. In addition to meeting local officials she visited the former UNHCR office where she prayed, laid a wreath and sprinkled flower petals on the site of her son’s death. Mrs. Collazo told Robert Ashe, UNHCR’s regional representative in Indonesia, that the visit had helped her “find peace and closure.” She added, “I have been able to see that my son has made a difference in other people’s lives. As a mother, I can say that I am very proud of him for all that he has done.” In a bitter conflict leading up to the independence of East Timor on May 20, 2002, hundreds of thousands of persons fled for their lives. Nearly a quarter of a million people subsequently returned, many with the help of humanitarian agencies and their field staff.

Identifying the missing

Tens of thousands of persons were killed in Bosnia-Herzegovina and other Balkan countries during the war in that region in the early 1990s. Many bodies have been recovered, some identified but thousands of others, especially those buried in mass graves, remain unidenti-

fied. That has begun to change slowly in Bosnia, thanks to an innovative DNA program, similar to one used in New York after the September 11 attacks on the World Trade Center there. Several hundred bodies have already been identified in the project which is seen as an im-

portant step toward reconciliation and comfort to many still grieving families. “I would like to take my sons’ bodies, once they are identified, so we can bury them, visit and lay flowers,” one mother said of her continuing efforts to find and identify her three missing sons.



UNHCR/J. REDDEN/DF/PAC-2002

Look into my eyes

A new electronic recognition technology using the iris of the eye has been successfully field tested and is expected to be used in some UNHCR operations. The iris, the colored portion of the eye around the pupil, has a unique texture, much as a fingerprint does. The new process involves taking a close-up picture of a refugee’s iris, digitally coding its texture and storing the data for future matching. It is quick and relatively unobtrusive. The recent field tests in Pakistan involved taking images of Afghan refugees, allowing aid officials to detect some of them who tried to cheat the system by ‘recycling’ themselves and applying for ‘going home’ aid several times over.

Helping the children

Thousands of unaccompanied children who enter the United States illegally each year and are subsequently apprehended, were placed in the custody of the Immigration and Naturalization Service which arranged their care, investigated their circumstances and decided their fate. This system changed March 1 this year, in part because of the repercussions following the terrorist attacks in September 2001. In a major government shake-up, the INS was moved to the newly established Homeland Security Department and the custody of the children transferred to the Department of Health and Human Services and its Office of Refugee Resettlement. The move was generally welcomed by humanitarian organizations. Such children will now “no longer have their prosecutor serve as their caretaker,” according to Alfred Carlton of the American Bar Association.

UNHCR/R. WILLIAMS ONY/CS/USA-2003



“We lost everything except our lives, but many people kissed the land when we reached Sri Lanka.”

A young refugee woman who narrowly escaped death en route back from India to her homeland.

“Young people should be at the forefront of global change... However, if they are left on society’s margins, all of us will be impoverished.”

U.N. Secretary-General KOFI ANNAN on the fate of the world’s uprooted youth.



“It is a Christian duty to welcome whoever comes knocking out of need.”

POPE JOHN PAUL II.



“I don’t got no house there. I don’t got nobody there.”

A 26-year-old Liberian refugee fleeing back to her still stricken homeland from Cote d’Ivoire, the country in which she had sought refuge.



“Yes, it’s terrible there, but it may be worse here... It’s like running from a fire only to fall in a river.”

A Liberian volunteer helping fellow Liberian refugees returning home after years of safety in Cote d’Ivoire.



“The program has effectively collapsed.”

KATHLEEN NEWLAND, executive director of Washington’s Migration Policy Institute on America’s faltering refugee resettlement program.



“We have to deal with a number of realities that make it tough sledding at times.”

A U.S. official saying the administration is working to overcome resettlement program difficulties following the terrorist attacks of 9/11.



“Don’t forget us if Iraq happens.”

Afghan President HAMID KARZAI to the U.S. government during the ongoing buildup in the Iraq crisis.



“Politicians have a choice to make. They can embrace the potential that immigrants and refugees represent or use them as political scapegoats.”

U.N. Secretary-General KOFI ANNAN.



“Let no one suggest... (that) it’s asylum that we need to fear. It’s those who use asylum...who we must fear.”

British Home Secretary DAVID BLUNKETT on new measures designed to combat abuse of the asylum system.



“I would like to see us reduce it by 30 to 40 percent in the next few months and I think by September we should have it halved.”

British Prime Minister TONY BLAIR, projecting that Britain will halve the number of asylum seekers shortly.



“The U.N. system is so deeply reactive it produces mismatches between needs and resources. It works on an ad hoc basis and just muddles through.”

ARTHUR HELTON of the Council on Foreign Relations on early U.N. contingency planning for a possible humanitarian crisis in Iraq.