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Estimated printed pages: 3

St. Petersburg Times

August 14, 1996

Edition: 0 SOUTH PINELLAS

Section: NATIONAL

Page: 2A

Topics:

**Index Terms:**

refugees

**Serbian refugees weary of living in political limbo**

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Dateline: BELGRADE, Yugoslavia

Article Text:

Lunic Vaso, 70, was standing outside a Belgrade food bank trying to account for his time.

""I walk all day," said the weather-beaten Serb farmer. But Vaso isn't going anywhere.

He is in Serbia after escaping, with only his life and a few belongings, a Croatian offensive last summer that drove the Serb population out of a swath of Croatia known as Krajiona.

Since Yugoslavia's violent breakup began in 1991, an estimated 650,000 refugees - 480,000 from Bosnia and 170,000 from Croatia have taken shelter in Serbia, which with tiny Montenegro makes up rump Yugoslavia. Vaso, like most of the other uprooted Serbs, knows there is little chance of going home.

""My home is destroyed, all my cows, my farm," he said. ""I don't have anything left. If somebody could just give me some guarantee that I could stay alive back there, I would go home."

Under the Dayton accords, ethnic Serbs have a right to return. But political infighting among Dayton's signatories and bureaucratic red tape have kept repatriation at a snail's pace, leaving the refugees in a political limbo that has made them Serbia's new underclass.

""There is no solution at the moment," said Marwan Elkhoury, a spokesman for the U.N.'s High Commissioner for Refugees. ""We will fight as much as possible for repatriation . . . (but) there is no way Serbs can return to Croat- or Muslim-controlled territory, and there is no way Muslims can return to Serb- or Croat-controlled areas."

About 85 percent of the refugees wait out the diplomatic maneuvers with relatives or friends, sharing apartments in some cases with 15 or 20 people. Most are unable to find jobs in an economy devastated by war and sanctions, or are forbidden to work because of their unofficial status.

Food distribution centers run by the United Nations, the European Community and CARE International deliver monthly rations to help people get by. Like other recipients, Vaso's monthly personal allowance is 1 kilogram (2.2 pounds) each of sugar, powdered milk and pasta, and a liter (1.06 quarts) of cooking oil.

A 35-percent tax imposed by the Serbian government in March on all locally bought items forced relief organizations to cease providing fresh food.

The psychological wounds the refugees have suffered are deep.

""Ana" came to Belgrade in 1993. Initially, she stayed with family. When they departed for Canada, Ana decided to remain and finish her university degree. Like most refugees, she is afraid to use her real name because her parents are still in Sarajevo and she fears they are in danger from government-tolerated Muslim gangs bent on killing or expelling the city's remaining Serbs.

""Some of my friends who are also refugees stayed with their families, but other people's relatives didn't want to help them," she said. ""When you have to give people money and food during a crisis, it's very hard. Some families promised to help before the war started, but when the critical moment came, they didn't do anything."

Ana says that although some Bosnian Serbs have opened businesses in Belgrade, many feel trapped. ""Most of them can't move on," she said. ""If they came here and had a better life in Belgrade than in Bosnia, they wouldn't think about their past."

The international sanctions that nearly strangled Serbia during the war, although recently relaxed, mean few economic opportunities for the refugees.

""People who were doctors, engineers and professors end up cleaning the street," Ana said. ""The Belgrade Serbs aren't interested in humiliating them, but there just aren't any other jobs."

Ana has stopped telling her story to local Serbs. ""At first people listened and were horrified," she said. ""But as time went by, they acted as if it were happening on Venus or Mars. It was so remote from them."

If people with family in Serbia feel isolated, the other 15 percent of refugees who live in collective centers feel even more so.

""People in collective centers usually are vulnerable persons with medical problems, people without connections, without family members or money to rent a flat," said Marc Rapoport, a field officer with the U.N. refugee commission.

A center called Kovilovo, a converted jam factory, is surrounded by fields 45 minutes from central Belgrade. Its interior is strictly industrial - former workshops and storerooms crammed with cots, lockers stuffed with donated clothing, the walls decorated with posters, candy wrappers and children's drawings. A zoo-like stench wafts from the only bathroom for 130 residents.

The center has even bigger problems: Its lease is up, the landlord wants the site back and the Serbian government must relocate the residents. Everyone must be out in three days. For people who already lost their homes, it is like being victimized all over again.

""We feel like cows. . . . I think it's worse what they're doing to us now than when we were driven from our home," said one weeping woman from Bosnia.

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