

Fate of Kosovars highlights Europe's attitude to refugees

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The NATO bombing of Serbia and Kosovo has brought images of tremendous suffering and tragedy to millions around the world. Virtually overnight, hundreds of thousands of refugees have fled to neighbouring states that are both incapable and unwilling to accommodate them.

The US-led military intervention has rapidly produced the most extensive refugee crisis since the end of the Second World War. Predictions are that the total number of displaced persons from the conflict could reach 650,000. The United Nations has warned that there will be mass starvation unless emergency food is quickly provided.

Whilst the coverage of events on the borders of Kosovo has saturated the Western press, and is used to manipulate public opinion behind the war, the fleeing Kosovars will join the ranks of millions of refugees that have burgeoned over the last decades.

The flood of refugees globally is the outcome of the policies of the major Western powers led by the United States. In the unrelenting drive to open up new markets, they have ripped apart economies such as in Eastern Europe, leading to social devastation. The West has both financed and militarily intervened in wars across virtually every continent, from Africa to the Middle East and Asia. Bitter civil wars and ethnic conflicts have torn through many regions following the fault lines of their former colonial oppression.

The streams of refugees from just a few countries in the recent period were all the outcome of such imperialist adventures or from the civil wars they have bequeathed: Sierra Leone--1.6 million refugees; Turkey--2 million Kurds displaced; Iraq--1 million; Sri Lanka--1 million, mainly Tamils; Burundi--1 million, Iran--2 million; and finally some 3 million Palestinians forced into exile. Behind these bald statistics lies untold

human misery.

The United Nations Commission for Human Rights (UNCHR) believes that there are some 25 million who have been forced to leave their country, and another 25 million who are presently displaced within their own countries, unable to return to their land and villages. More than 75 million have been uprooted in the last 60 years.

While the US and Europe claim that their intervention in Kosovo is purely for "humanitarian" reasons, how have they responded to the global refugee crisis? Their borders are slammed shut; basic democratic and welfare rights are being destroyed. Refugees fleeing persecution, torture and civil war are confronted with ever-greater physical and administrative barriers. Asylum seekers may spend years in fear of expulsion, waiting to hear whether their claim will be accepted or not. They are denied the right to settle permanently and are generally prohibited from working while being disqualified from receiving welfare benefits--forced to exist on charity handouts. Many refugees are kept in detention centres and prisons, although they have committed no crime. Hundreds and thousands are deported to face the exact same conditions they had fled.

There were 3.7 million asylum applications in Europe between 1988 and 1997. The United Nations says that 334,000 refugees applied for asylum in 1997 alone, of whom 211,000 were rejected.

The development of global production means Europe is more integrated than ever before, economically and technologically. However, when it comes to the free movement of people, the external borders are more closely policed than ever in the new "Fortress Europe" that is the European Union (EU).

Last year, new anti-democratic measures were

implemented following the arrival of 1,000 Kurdish refugees. A trans-European database of asylum seekers was launched and wide authority given to the police to make arrests and engage in hot pursuits across national borders. Under the new system, an immigrant who cannot produce the correct papers or an EU visa could face instant fingerprinting, detention and deportation without appeal.

In Germany in 1993, with the support of the social democrats, parliament passed a bill to cut social support for immigrant workers whose request for asylum had been dismissed. Unable to work or claim welfare under the new legislation, asylum seekers receive payment in kind, getting special vouchers that can be exchanged for a limited number of items they may require. Thousands were placed in detention centres; their right to appeal reduced. This set a precedent for all the other EU countries.

In 1995 in France, measures were implemented to require special identity cards for refugees that they have to carry at all times, and to impose cuts in their benefits and health and housing provisions. Employers have been turned into the extended arm of the Immigration Service, having to verify the status of workers before employing them. The social democratic government of Lionel Jospin promised to relax these measures, but within months of coming to office he ditched this pledge and drafted a bill in line with the policies of the previous conservative regime.

In Belgium, the grand coalition under Luc Dehaene, composed of Christian Democrats and the Socialist Party, has planned 15,000 deportations this year alone.

In Britain, the Labour government has implemented a new Immigration and Asylum Bill that goes further than any measures imposed under the Tories. Modelled on Germany, this included the setting up of "reception zones" which resemble the internment camps that Jewish refugees coming to Britain in the 1930s faced. Tremendous powers to bar entry and order the arrest of refugees have been given to immigration officers. Marriage registrars will have the right to refuse to marry people they suspect of arranging "bogus" marriages.

While a few Western governments have finally offered to take in some refugees from Kosovo, on a strictly temporary basis, the vast majority will remain in the NATO-policed camps being erected in

Macedonia, or be forced to take their chances in Albania, Europe's poorest country.

A meeting of European Union home affairs ministers on April 7, rejected American proposals for an "air bridge" to transport tens of thousands of Kosovar refugees. The EU ministers instead proposed to spend £160 million on establishing camps within the Balkans.

The British Labour government, the European power most enthusiastic in support of the war, pledged a paltry £10 million in aid and the setting up of a NATO-protected "sanctuary" in Macedonia. Prime Minister Tony Blair revealed the cynical and indifferent attitude that dominates official politics claiming that taking in the Kosovars "won't solve anything. It will only play into the hands of Milosevic."

Sections of the media like the *Guardian* have become concerned that the government's hard-line attitude towards the Kosovar refugees may expose its claims to be acting for purely "humanitarian" reasons. They have urged Blair to reconsider. Instead, the EU has dropped all talk of quotas for refugee Kosovars due to Britain's refusal to specify any figure, and France's refusal to take any at all.



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