

Kosovar refugees object to sub-standard conditions in Australia

Mike Head
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It hasn't taken long for the authorities in Australia to display their true feelings toward the Kosovar refugees. Having originally been loathe to accept any, the Howard government eventually agreed two months ago to temporarily house 4,000 in far-flung military camps. When the first planeloads landed, Prime Minister John Howard and Immigration Minister Philip Ruddock made long and pompous speeches of welcome.

This week, however, the official welcome turned sour. The forced smiles gave way to contempt, physical intimidation and threats. The reason? On Monday, three busloads of refugees objected to the sub-standard living conditions at a military base near Singleton, 230 kilometres north-west of Sydney, and sat in their buses, refusing to enter the assigned huts. For three freezing nights, some of the 80 men, women and children continued their protest, which ended with the hospitalisation of one 74-year-old woman, suffering pneumonia, late on Wednesday evening.

Refugees said the conditions at the Singleton base—where 700 Kosovars have been sent—were worse than those in the squalid tent cities in Macedonia and Albania. They objected to the lack of bathroom and toilet facilities in their ageing wooden huts, the inadequate heating and protection from mid-winter's cold winds, and the absence of any privacy for family groups.

Officials initially barred reporters from inspecting the facilities, but some refugees gave journalists surreptitious tours. Their reports confirmed the following:

- * Communal bathroom and toilet blocks were up to half a kilometre from the huts.

- * In the shower blocks, cubicles were made from fibro cement, with no doors and no shower curtains. There were no baths for children and no toilets, just portable "Superloos". Hot water pipes, light bulbs and electrical cables were dangerously exposed. Water from the sinks drained straight into concrete troughs dug into the floor.

- * Dormitories had cold, discoloured, torn linoleum floors, and bare steel beds, tables and lockers, with sparsely-spaced small electric heaters. Families were only separated by

temporary partitions. There were no double beds. There were sinks but no water came from the taps. In at least one case, the windows had no glass.

- * There were few recreational facilities, not even the soccer, volleyball and pingpong equipment that refugees enjoyed at their initial holding camp in Sydney.

Femi Mavras, 24, and his wife, Zarife, 23, had fled Kosovo after family members were killed. They told a reporter that initially they were grateful to be brought to Australia. "We thought it would be wonderful," Femi said. "We did not think it would be like this." Fisnik Hoti, 18, said the government had broken its promise that the refugees would have their own buildings and bathrooms. A spokesman, Najim Sejdim, said the base was "no better than Macedonia".

Another refugee, Ardian Frusina, a 20-year-old photojournalist, commented that people were not just objecting to the poor conditions but also to how officials treated them. "They have made us feel like we are living on an animal farm, in a zoo," he said. Adrian Kastrati explained: "We just want elementary comfort." He added that the \$20 weekly allowance given to each adult was not enough to spend in local shops.

These complaints won support from the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees representative, Lyndall Sachs. Describing the conditions as "inappropriate," she observed: "Having a toilet 500 metres away, particularly if there are young girls or young kids, having to take the kids to the toilets at night would be a very frightening experience for anyone, be they grown-up or a child." The UNHCR later played down the criticism, no doubt after pressure from the government.

The fact that the refugees publicly asserted their right to protest provoked official outrage. The government sought to starve the refugees into submission. Immigration Department officials refused to give food or drinks to anyone on the buses, even children and babies. According to one media report, children were crying and mothers were trying unsuccessfully to breastfeed infants. Elderly people

were shivering with cold.

Nevertheless, people would only be fed when they got off the buses, officials told the media. After 24 hours, two families of five gave in to cold and hunger, followed by another 24 a few hours later. By Wednesday night only three remained on one bus, including Elmaze Salihu, 74.

Immigration Minister Ruddock personally took responsibility for the official response. Speaking on the second day of the protest, he declared: “They [the refugees] won't be taken anywhere. I suspect that in time they will come to agree that it is preferable to have accommodation where you have access to toilet facilities, where you're able to be properly fed and clothed and housed and sheltered, rather than in large numbers, women and children, occupying several buses.”

Asked about requests from some of the refugees to be returned to Europe, Ruddock said they were free to go—but only if they paid their own fares. In other words, the refugees had no choice.

Ruddock added that Australia had not promised “five-star accommodation”. His remarks only accentuated the government's hypocrisy. If the Kosovars were genuinely welcome in the government's eyes—as welcome, say, as corporate investors—the refugees would indeed have been offered decent accommodation, perhaps even in hotels. Instead, despite the trauma that the Kosovars had experienced, they were consigned to military barracks in various parts of the country, far from the Albanian-speaking communities in Melbourne and Sydney.

Like most military bases, the one at Singleton is not designed for human comfort, nor for families. In fact, it is particularly spartan. It has long functioned as a training facility for infantry recruits, designed to condition young men to the harshness of military life. Singleton, located in the upper Hunter Valley, is known for being cold and wet in winter, with overnight temperatures likely to drop below freezing, as they did this week.

Not to be outdone, the Labour Party's immigration spokesman, Con Sciacca, joined Ruddock in denouncing the refugees. “I think they are being looked after well and it is a bit red-hot for the organisers of this protest to say they want more,” he said.

The treatment of the Kosovars provided another case study in how the mass media augments government policy. The public shift in the official attitude was mirrored throughout the press, as well as radio and television.

For two months the media displayed rare sensitivity toward the Kosovars. While other refugees—those seeking to land by boat from Asia and Africa for example—are demonised as “invaders” and “criminals,” the Kosovars were actually presented as ordinary human beings who had

come through extraordinary suffering. Partly as a result, there was an outpouring of public support across the country, particularly in the communities near the bases designated as “safe havens”. In Singleton itself, women sewed 800 quilts and sets of curtains in a bid to make the army huts hospitable; thousands of residents donated clothes, toys, bikes, computers and playground equipment; school students organised concerts; the mineworkers union contributed \$10,000.

Now the media has turned on the Kosovars with a vengeance, in some cases whipping up ill-feeling among those who have so warmly assisted. “THANKS A LOT—How ungrateful refugees offended the town that opened its arms,” declared the front-page headline in Thursday's *Sydney Daily Telegraph*. “That's gratitude!” proclaimed the *Illawarra Mercury* in Wollongong. Perhaps the most poisonous line came from one of Rupert Murdoch's columnists, the *Daily Telegraph's* Mike Gibson. He likened the Kosovars to pampered aristocrats objecting to the slightly inferior quality of the vintage wine served in a luxury hotel suite (perhaps writing as one familiar with the lifestyle). He suggested that the “whingeing” refugees be kicked out of the country.

By Thursday the government-media campaign had become so crude that an editorial in the *Australian* —Murdoch's national broadsheet newspaper—sounded a note of caution. It criticised Ruddock for offering “no more understanding than a snide remark that Australia had never promised five-star accommodation”. It noted: “Such meanness suggests that the primary motivation for bringing these people halfway around the world was salving our conscience, not attending to the welfare of people in desperate need.”

The *Australian* is not noted for liberal attitudes. Its concern for the refugees is no more genuine than that of the government. But it recognises that the Kosovars are a convenient symbol, justifying the NATO onslaught on Yugoslavia. The *Australian's* concern is only that the “humanitarian” mask not be dropped too quickly.



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