Italy bars entry to fleeing Kosovan Gypsies

Mike Ingram
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As the full extent of the human catastrophe unleashed on the Balkans by NATO bombers begins to emerge, the Italian government has proclaimed that it "can no longer apply the terms of the humanitarian protection decree which was in force during the war".

Speaking for the Interior Ministry, Daniala Pugliese sought to justify the decision made last Tuesday to treat those who enter the country without visas from Yugoslavia as illegal immigrants rather than refugees.

The decision was taken after 2,000 Gypsies arrived at Italian ports in the past month, with over 1,200 of these arriving in the last week alone. More than 700 arrived in the southern port of Brindisi from Bar in Montenegro. They came ashore in an ancient fishing boat and were followed by a further 500 on Tuesday. These were only the latest among thousands of Gypsy refugees fleeing attacks inspired by the Kosovo Liberation Army, as ethnic Albanians return to their homes.

Buried deep among the thousands of press dispatches reporting in every detail the alleged atrocities of Serb forces in Kosovo, reports have now emerged of the systematic persecution of these Romany gypsies by the KLA. The fate of the Romanies was first drawn to international attention in early June, when a screaming mob attacked a Gypsy family at a Macedonian refugee camp.

Even when these tragic developments are actually reported, however, the big business media outlets feel obliged to add their own disclaimers. For example, the BBC carries a July 5 report that speaks of, "a new and equally tragic crisis unfolding right here in the middle of Kosovo. These are not Albanians, they are not Serbs—these are gypsies... Their problems are getting bigger by the day."

Then comes the disclaimer: "Gypsies are accused by Albanians of collaborating in Serb brutalities, which is why they've also become victims of revenge attacks. *And the truth is, some probably did*." [Emphasis added]

Thousands of Gypsies have been burned out of their homes. About 3,000 frightened refugees from across Kosovo are crammed into a dilapidated schoolhouse in the town of Kosovo Polje on the outskirts of Pristina. Many more have poured into neighbouring Montenegro in the hope of finding a boat to Italy.

Justifying the decision to turn back the refugees, Italian Prime Minister Massimo D'Alema told a popular television talk show: "Today there is an international contingent that has the task of protecting all the minorities that live in Kosovo."

There are numerous examples of NATO troops standing by as Albanians engage in what the NATO forces regard as justifiable "revenge attacks", so many Gypsies are distrustful of the so-called “peace force”. "NATO has only made things worse for us, so we will never trust them", one Gypsy man told the *Daily Telegraph*.

Trying to present the decision in the humanitarian language used to justify NATO's original bombardment, D'Alema said, "If I recognise someone's status as a refugee I am legitimising the possibility that a minority can be driven out of a country where there is an international contingent present. And that would be a mistake".

In doing so he has unwittingly acknowledged that the NATO action did nothing to end ethnic cleansing.

The new policy has been condemned by humanitarian agencies. Elena Benvenuto of the Italian Solidarity League said, "To send people back without even allowing them to apply for political asylum would be criminal, also because those arriving at the moment are victims of the vendettas which have been unleashed by the end of the war. There is the suspicion that the government has got tougher because the arrival of the Romany people, who are less welcome than other immigrants."

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Lorretta Caponi of Italy's forum of foreign communities said the interior ministry should not have taken the decision, but that parliament should have been able to debate the matter in full. She raised the possibility that the change in attitude to the refugees is only the beginning of a tougher immigration policy within the country. "It's just a tactic by the interior ministry to test the waters, to see what the effect would be of a real toughening of the approach to immigrants", she told the *Guardian*.

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