

ASYLUM SEEKERS AFTER KOSOVO

THE POST-KOSOVO EUROPEAN REFUGEE CRISIS

Real Refugees, the Abuse of Asylum and Organised Crime

With the end of the 78 day war between NATO and Yugoslavia, hundreds of thousands of Kosovar Albanians may have returned home, but a new refugee crisis followed. The flow of would-be asylum seekers claiming to be from Kosovo and trying to enter EU states has not stopped. During the summer several European countries reported an upsurge in the number of refugees arriving and seeking asylum, notably Great Britain, Germany, France and Italy. During the summer, the British Helsinki Human Rights Group conducted several on-the-spot observation missions in Dover, Calais and south-eastern Italy to analyse the complex and controversial issues of political asylum, migration, and the role of the mafia in people smuggling.

The summer of 1999 has seen a spate of incidents reported in the media without adequate analysis.

In Dover, on the south coast of England, tensions flared between local youths and asylum seekers that resulted in several people being wounded in knife attacks.

In Calais, on the other side of the English Channel, refugees claiming to be from Kosovo, put up an ersatz camp in the city's main park to draw attention to their plight. It was cleared by the French riot police, the CRS.

Along the coast of **Puglia in southern Italy** hundreds of asylum seekers arrive every day, including gypsies from Kosovo. One boatload of would-be refugees was apparently drowned at sea off Montenegro after being thrown overboard by the people smugglers. Added to which, hundreds of containers filled with humanitarian aid for Kosovo which should have been delivered by the state-sponsored charity Arcobaleno months ago have been discovered sitting at the port of Bari and in Durres in Albania.

Reports in both national and local newspapers in these countries have highlighted concerns that many refugees are not fleeing political persecution per se but seeking work and more favourable economic circumstances in the more affluent West. More alarmingly, police in Western Europe suspect that the influx of refugees is part of a worldwide network involving not just the smuggling of people but also the control of drug, prostitution and paedophile networks.

The subject has become a difficult one to discuss calmly as anyone who sets out to analyse the nature of the refugee problem tends to be labelled as 'racist'. Refusal to question anyone's motives however tends to tarnish the genuine asylum seekers and other honest would-be arrivals in Western Europe with the criminal brush since ordinary people are made cynical about the whole asylum issue by the refusal of self-appointed spokesmen for refugees to tackle the hard questions about people smuggling, crime and dishonest claims for asylum. This blanket denial of the grey side of the asylum issue ignores the reality that many refugees are themselves pawns in the hands of international criminals. The fact that most of them pay thousands of Deutsche Marks or dollars to reach Western Europe is testimony to the fact that asylum is big business for many unscrupulous people who have no concern for the fate of those whose passage to freedom they facilitate.

Having already visited the key port of embarkation for Italy in Albania, Vlore, in 1998, members of the BHHRG visited Dover, Calais and southern Italy in August-September, 1999, to examine the nature and extent of the problems there.

Their report concludes that:

(1) The definition of asylum contained in Article 14 (1) of the United Nations Declaration of Human Rights - to offer protection to those suffering political persecution - is now largely irrelevant. Apart from a handful of people (see below) no one interviewed by the BHHRG claimed to have been persecuted politically; they wanted to work and gain a decent standard of living, better than they could hope for in the countries of origin. These are not dishonourable motives, but to achieve asylum status applicants must dissemble their true economic motives and invent political or religious reasons.

(2) Attempts to strengthen and refine domestic methods of applying asylum laws will do little to curtail the flow. Despite much-vaunted cooperation between EU member states and legislation like the Dublin Convention the understanding is that 'the problem' can be shifted from one EU country to another.

(3) The rationale behind the existence of bodies like the Council of Europe is blown open. For example, people from Romania and Poland are considered suitable candidates for asylum despite those countries having met the human rights criteria for membership in the Council of Europe.

(4) Many of the problems that now exist have resulted from ill-conceived foreign policy decisions made by the Europeans and their more powerful American allies in the Balkans and Eastern Europe, in particular. This has involved promoting and supporting patently mafia regimes which, when once established, are impossible to control. KFOR's hopeless attempts to stem Kosovar Albanian violence in the past 3 months demonstrates this all too well.

BHHRG has long experience of studying mafia activities in the FRY republic of Montenegro and in Albania. According to all the experts in Italy, Albania is the outlet for most of the people smuggling that is now taking place. However, when former president Berisha attempted to control smugglers in October, 1996, his government was brought down in 1997 by an uprising led by a strange alliance of mafia gangs and former Communists with, many believed, covert American help, certainly with vocal support from EU and US capitals. Since then Albania's role as exporter of people and organised crime to Italy and beyond has exploded despite the Tirana government's signature on cooperation agreements especially with Italy. Unlike Albania, the West's ally in Yugoslavia, President Milo Djukanovic of Montenegro has refused even to sign anti-mafia and anti-smuggling agreements with Italy.

It is a sad irony that NATO's humanitarian crusade in the Balkans has promoted a refugee exodus and an explosion of organised crime. The human rights of hundreds of millions inside and outside the EU are threatened by the failure to control international organised crime and its political backers especially in the Balkans.

ITALY

The Problem

The majority of illegal immigrants enter Western Europe through the south-eastern Puglia region of Italy. The area is poor but it has two important ports, Bari and Brindisi, which connect Italy with the Balkans, Greece and Albania. A flat, scrubby coastline dotted with abandoned buildings makes landing the small craft used by the Italian and Albanian smugglers (known as *Scafisti*) and the dispersal of their cargo of asylum seekers relatively easy.

It is general knowledge that most of the smuggling operates from southern Albania, from the port of Vlora (Vallona) from where high - powered speed boats that carry around 40 passengers easily evade the Italian coastguard patrols to reach the coast. Although the trade in refugees has been publicized widely since the Kosovo crisis - many Kosovan refugees paid middlemen to arrange their departure from camps in Albania - it has been going on for some time. In January 1998 BHHRG representatives saw groups of men making their

way in broad daylight towards boats moored along the bay in Vlora. Police stood nearby doing nothing even though the new Albanian government (elected in summer 1997) had assured European governments of its commitment to stamp out the trade.

Formal cooperation between the Albanian authorities and the Italian coastguards has only brought about the confiscation of one boat so far. Michele Emiliano, chief procurator for the anti-mafia squad in Bari told BHHRG that the Albanians agreed to undertake all kinds of measures to control the smuggling but there was nothing to show for it. In reality, it is very difficult to adequately police the Albanian coast where rocky inlets and bad roads make it a paradise for the smuggler. Michele Emiliano whose particular remit is Albanian crime in Italy explained how difficult it was to catch the smugglers as well as other Albanian mafia operating in Italy. One problem is that the main culprits are constantly evading identification by changing their names.

While Albania is the centre of people smuggling, the republic of Montenegro is regarded as the source of the smuggling of contraband into Italy. Cigarettes worth millions of lira enter from ports like Budva, Bar and Kotor on the Montenegrin coast each week. Apart from the loss of revenue, the trade has produced its own human tragedies. Police have died giving chase and colliding with the smugglers' heavily armoured cars along the busy coast road between Bari and Brindisi.

The Albanian government has entered into (albeit formal) cooperation with Rome to crack down on smugglers but the reformist President Djukanovic in Podgorica has yet to allow Italian coastguards to patrol the Montenegrin coast. This seems remarkably obtuse and unhelpful for such a pro-Western government. However, as BHHRG has revealed [see BHHRG **Montenegro Presidential Election, 1998**] Djukanovic himself and his government were elected in dubious polls which were, nevertheless, hailed as triumphs for democracy by the international community. It seems that the president's reputation as a smuggler and black-marketeer, earned during the war in Bosnia, seems to have left a more enduring legacy than was perhaps anticipated.

The Refugees

21,000 illegal immigrants have arrived in the province of Lecce this year which is more than came in the whole of 1998. About 100 arrive every day although others put the figures higher, at c.160. However, these figures represent the ones who enter the system; everyone admits that many get away eluding the coastguards and police altogether. While the war in Kosovo accounts for much of the augmentation of numbers this is not the complete story; there are also large numbers of Kurds and Iraqis as well as Albanians themselves. And, despite the fact that the war ended in June with Kosovan Albanians the 'victors' under the protection of NATO many still continue to leave the province. Inevitably, it can be difficult to detect whether or not an Albanian speaker is from Albania proper or Kosovo, especially when that person might originate in the Geg populated areas of northern Albania.

While some may feel they owe a debt to the human traffickers for giving them a chance to build a better life in the West, the trade is fundamentally evil. Should the coastguards approach or the smugglers' boats feel too heavy someone or everyone can be thrown overboard. Bodies are washed up regularly on the Italian coast including those of children. 100 gypsies were tossed into the sea after leaving Montenegro in mid-August. The body of a Chinese man was discovered a few days before BHHRG arrived.

The response of the authorities in Puglia is efficient and humane. Those caught are sent to a reception centre near Otranto from where they are dispersed to one or other local residential centres while their applications for temporary residence permits are processed which usually takes about 10 days. The applicant must have asked for political asylum and stated that he or she fears persecution at home. Once the formalities are completed the person is free to go while their applications for political asylum are considered in Rome. In fact, over 80% disappear completely and are deemed to have left the country altogether. They will probably dispose of their Italian identity documents en route and apply for asylum *ab initio* at their next

destination. It is hardly surprising, then, that the Italian authorities dispose of an asylum application within months rather than years - unlike the United Kingdom.

Some groups are subject to rulings and decrees that give them a special status. The Kurds for instance are regarded by the Italian government to be persecuted *in toto* and therefore, *prima facie*, entitled to asylum. Albanians from Kosovo were also given automatic rights to remain by a special decree due to expire on 31st December 1999. Prime Minister D'Alema has since revoked the decree and Kosovans have to apply under the normal law. Once detected by the system ordinary Albanians are sent back immediately although many try to return again and again, no doubt, eventually succeeding.

BHHRG visited two reception centres at San Foco near Otranto and Squinzano a few miles south of Brindisi. There are now 1370 such centres in Italy. Casa Regina Pacis is a church-run centre by the sea. The British visitor is immediately struck by the fact that this is, effectively, a camp surrounded by a high wire-mesh fence from which the asylum seeker is prevented from leaving by police posted inside. Talk of utilizing or constructing holding centres like these in the United Kingdom is met by outrage from civil libertarians. However, people can and do escape as the atmosphere is relaxed and unthreatening.

However, it would be hard to imagine anyone wanting to escape. The centre is impeccably run by a host of volunteers who maintain high standards of comfort and cleanliness. There is a clinic with its own doctor, a shop offering various kinds of soaps and shampoos and a 'boutique' stocked with every kind of clothing and footwear as well as three changing rooms for the fashion conscious. The state offers the centres 30,000 lira per refugee per day for their upkeep which is all the money provided at this stage. Phone calls and cigarettes have to be paid for from their own pockets. Judging by the amounts some refugees will have paid to leave - we heard of figures ranging from 1600 DM for a trip from Albania to \$3000 for a lorry ride from eastern Turkey - it is unsurprising to note that several are on the phone as we visit and many smoke. "They all have money" said the spokesman for the centre.

In the last 2 years between 16,000 and 17,000 people have passed through San Foco - there were 500 inmates at the time of the BHHRG visit with 3 to 4 boats arriving each day. The numbers are growing every day, according to a spokesman for the charity. As was the case in both Calais and Dover, most of the inhabitants were young men. 'Toni' who claimed to come from Pec in Kosovo was typical. He had paid 1600 DM to the *Scafisti* to get to Italy. His ambition is to make money and then return to Kosovo in one or two years time. He made no mention of persecution or fear. In fact, only **one** person in the centre gave BHHRG visitors the impression of being a refugee from political persecution.

Unlike San Foco the Centro L'Orizzonte at Squinzano is run by a secular charity. It, too, keeps asylum seekers incarcerated while their residence permits are processed with security provided by armed police from the Italian Garda di Finanzia. Again, human rights activists usually object to the presence of armed police in black uniforms such as these. However, the authorities say that the police are necessary to protect the refugees as local *Scafisti* try to enter the camp and steal documents.

There were 300 people at the centre during the BHHRG visit, mostly Kurds and Kosovars. As usual, the greater number were young men although there were some girls including a group of Kurds heading, eventually, for an address in Stoke Newington, London. Two girls from Moldova and Romania (both members of the Council of Europe) were looking for 'a better life' with no mention of political persecution. In fact the centre's main courtyard/exercise yard was daubed with political slogans mainly for both the PKK and anti-Ocalan groups, but also for the UCK. Despite the Italian sensitivity to liberation struggles we were told that only 2 out of 50 Tamils who asked for asylum in 1997 were successful. The others were sent back to Sri Lanka.

This centre was not as well-appointed as the Casa Regina Pacis but it was still properly and humanely run. A separate building catered for minors (under 18s). Unlike their adult counterparts they can leave the centre and seek work. They can also remain there until they are 18. This is particularly important to the centre's director who knew of many tragic cases in

which boys are 'sold' to paedophiles in Belgium and girls into prostitution. Of course, when these minors reach adulthood they are able to bring their relatives to join them in Italy.

The Italian people feel sympathy for the refugees and the sensitive way in which the reception centres are organized testifies to this. However, such sympathy is stronger in Puglia than elsewhere in Italy. Few refugees are visible in the towns and villages of the region - everyone knows that they move on either to the more prosperous north of Italy and then to Germany and Great Britain. Newspapers in northern Italy are full of stories dealing with asylum-related crime like theft and robbery. There have also been horrific murders

But the attitude so aptly described as NIMBY or "not in my backyard" pervades the debate on asylum seekers from the heel of Italy to central London. A typical example are recent remarks made by the mayoral candidate for London, MP Glenda Jackson [Guardian...]who, on the one hand, attacks those who want stricter control on asylum seekers while at the same time promising to disperse the many presently housed in the London boroughs. Rosanna Metrangola a journalist on *the Quotidiano di Lecce* said that refugees moved on and the issue was no longer "news" for the paper's readers - unlike the *Dover Express* and *Folkestone Herald* in England whose letters' editors are overwhelmed by mail.

Roma refugees from Kosovo

Bari: centro a prima accoglienza Bari Palese

Asylum seekers tend to enter Italy along the coast south of the port of Bari. However, in August hundreds of Roma refugees fled Kosovo through Montenegrin ports to Bari, the largest group arriving on 19th August. Roma refugees from Kosovo had told representatives of the BHHRG in July that they wanted to go to Italy.

By 1st September no more had arrived - perhaps the drowning of up to 100 gypsies during the crossing from Montenegro in small fishing boats had acted as a disincentive to leave, for the moment at least. The cost to each person for the journey - 1000 to 2500 marks - must also deter such large families.

The centre is situated within an Italian air force base close to Bari's civilian airport. Refugees are housed in caravans and have proper facilities for eating and washing, although the centre lack the shops, doctors etc. laid on by the Catholic charities. Out of 385 refugees, 310 are Albanian-speaking gypsies from Kosovo.

When BHHRG visited volunteers were helping to entertain the many young children in the centre. Italian police and officials from the local prefecture manage the centre efficiently and humanely although, again, there is a fence around the perimeter and people are not allowed to leave.

This group of refugees is manifestly different from all the others seen by BHHRG in Italy in that it consists overwhelmingly of families with children, babies as well as the elderly - the normal pattern one would expect to see with refugees everywhere and which was the case when refugees fled Kosovo itself in April 1999 and as Serb families have done since. According to the police officer in charge of the camp all the gypsies say they were chased from Kosovo by the UCK. As these people speak Albanian their expulsion can only be explained in terms of their 'race' - a classic example of ethnic cleansing.

Although the authorities at the centre said that none of the gypsies displayed any signs of physical violence several showed BHHRG what they purported to be wounds inflicted during their expulsion. While it is impossible to say why or how such wounds came about some refugees certainly had marks/bruises on their legs and arms. In July we saw gypsies (mainly women) in a camp in Kosovo, and by the roadside in southern Serbia with fresh bruises and cuts to their faces and bodies [see BHHRG July]

Form filling and translation was being facilitated by a young Kosovar during our visit. He dismissed all allegations of violence and destruction of property made to BHHRG by the gypsies as "lies" even though their accounts revealed a pattern of behaviour related to the Group on previous occasions. More worryingly, an application form showed to the BHHRG by the police officer at the centre revealed that the Roma applicant had answered "No" to the question "Were you politically persecuted? ", a reply that would mean refusal of permission for that person to stay in Italy. The same young man was observed facilitating the translation and completion of this form. Other people have complained about the inaccurate and manipulative way in which Albanian translators have communicated information during the Kosovar crisis. Albanian is a notoriously arcane language added to which a nod of the head to indicate 'no' in Albania means the opposite - and vice versa.

The Arcobaleno Affair: humanitarian aid still at the Bari docks

While the human fall-out from the war in Kosovo can be seen in the refugee centres around Italy, other troubling aspects to the crisis are beginning to emerge. Towards the end of August, *Panorama* the weekly magazine of the main newspaper in south-east Italy, *Gazetta de Mezzogiorno*, revealed that hundreds of containers full of aid to Kosovo had never been delivered and were still lying on the dockside at Bari, or in the Albanian port at Durres. An investigation has since been opened to see whether or not criminal forces are in any way involved. The containers _ there were over 1000 until some were opened and their contents sent to Turkey following the recent earthquake _ have become the subject of what is fast-becoming known as the Arcobaleno scandal.

Arcobaleno (Rainbow) was the name given to the Italian government's initiative to raise money and humanitarian aid for the refugees from Kosovo pouring into Albania and Macedonia during the war. It was in effect a quango (quasi-non-governmental organization) whose web page advertises Prime Minister D'Alema's web-site and operates out of the head of government's Palazzo Chigi. The organization which was part of the Protezione Civile was wound down in June and its management handed over to 3 NGOs who were mandated to handle future distribution of aid within Albania. Arcobaleno also raised a large amount of money from the Italian public: on 2nd September 1999 its bank account contained 129 billion lira. Why this money has not been spent has not yet been answered.

Italian State sponsored aid in waiting

The Italian authorities have been remarkably jumpy about the revelations. The prime minister, Massimo D'Alema took half a page of the leading Italian daily *La Repubblica* to defend the government's handling of aid to Kosovo. It seems to be the case that all the leading NATO countries are ultra sensitive to any negative criticism of events surrounding the war. Michele Emiliano who is managing the inquiry felt that the vast amount of money and aid collected for Kosovo was quite out of proportion to the need. However, it was very important for Western governments to exaggerate the extent of the crisis as a way of justifying their aggression against Yugoslavia. It seems now that the fall-out has begun from this dishonest and manipulative policy, a policy that killed innocent people and operated a fraud on the good intentions of the public in Western Europe.

BHHRG visited the port at Bari to see the containers. 900 remain and there are another 1000 in Albania itself. The cost of keeping them there - 5m. lira per day - is met by the Italian state through the Protezione Civile. It is somewhat surprising that the cost in much poorer Albania is twice as much - _10m lira per day. Costs will, apparently, decrease with time.

British aid containers at Bari docks months after the end of the war

When the scandal broke some of the containers were opened to reveal food, medicines, clothes often jumbled together with the food going bad and contaminating other items. Each container displayed a log of its value from between 1 to 5 m. lira. The log also showed from where the aid had been gathered in Italy _ from Rome in the centre of the country to Trento in the north. One container was placed too high to examine closely but it displayed a large sign

"The North Wales Kosovo Appeal." This was not the only aid abandoned at Bari which had been collected in other EU countries.

Aid from Wales meant to be for Kosovo in Bari

Mrs Kate Wilson of the North Wales Kosovo Appeal told the BHHRG that her volunteers had sent ten truckloads of aid (2 containers per truck) to Italy in April and May. The trucks had been directed to an Italian military base near Milan. Mrs Wilson was confident that their onward journey to the refugee camps for Kosovars in Albania would be successful because the Italian authorities undertook to arrange and pay for their onward journey. She remembers: "We were emphatically told that it would be in Albania within forty-eight hours of leaving Milan!"

The kindest explanation for the extraordinary mountains of aid languishing at the ports of Bari and Durres is that of Magistrate Emiliano, who suggests that the "most excessive generosity of the Italian people" (who incidentally donated almost £100m in cash to Arcobaleno) had produced more aid than the Kosovo refugees could consume. The Italian press remains less sympathetic towards what after all was a government-organised project. Probes by the media in other countries which sent aid via Italy _ or rather aid which ended its journey to Kosovo in Italy _ must be expected.

The port of Calais in France

France has a variety of problems associated with migration and asylum-seekers from North Africa, but the port of Calais just 22 miles across the English Channel from Dover provides the jumping-off point for people who wish to cross into Britain. Other Channel ports, including those in Belgium and Holland, attract some would-be asylum-seekers anxious to enter Britain but Calais is the most important point of embarkation by far. The means employed usually involve stowing away in the back of one of the many trucks that pass daily into the English port. Despite the fact that truckers face a fine in England if it can be proved they knowingly transported illegal immigrants, many say that their human cargo climbs into the back of the vehicles without their knowledge. Some have alleged that immigrants have threatened them with knives in order to gain passage, but it cannot be ruled out that others knowingly collude in the trade for the substantial financial rewards it offers _ up to several thousand dollars per person carried. On the day BHHRG visited Dover 140 people had been found hidden in the back of a truck.

Many also enter Britain on the Eurostar train service from France. Once in France an immigrant can buy a ticket in Paris for the last station before the Tunnel and a second for the cross-Channel section of the route and get on the train with only perfunctory checks on documents to contend with since on showing only the first ticket the impression is given that he intends only to travel to Calais.

The French authorities allow those from Kosovo as well as from other parts of the ex-Yugoslavia (apart from Serbia) and Afghanistan provisional permission to stay in the country, even those who have arrived illegally. But problems with refugees from Kosovo are the most contentious. In mid August, 209 Kosovars, including 59 children, set up camp in Calais's main park, the Parc Saint-Pierre, opposite the town hall to highlight their plight. On 20th August riot police (CRS) evacuated the area and dispersed the refugees to two locations _ a hanger 5km outside the town in the village of Sangatte and a hospital building at the rue Valmy, within Calais itself. As in Britain, the French authorities are sensitive to emotions and sympathy surrounding the Kosovo issue. While other refugees in the area have to make do with sleeping rough in and around the port, those from Kosovo are properly accommodated. The observers met several Iraqi Kurds living behind the bushes near the docks. One noted that in 1991 his people had been the West's favourite refugees but they were forgotten now. This group said that the police had even prevented local people giving them food and regularly tried to move them on. However, the absence of any police presence in the vicinity of the docks at the time must be noted.

Reception Centres at Sangatte and the Rue Valmy

BHHRG visited the centre at Sangatte which had already gained the reputation among activists as a bleak and unsuitable place for the refugees to be. Although not of the very high standards seen in the Italian centres, Sangatte is acceptably run. Contrary to the media impression the refugees are not housed in the vast space but rather are accommodated in clean and well-appointed dormitory trailers within the hanger itself. A local charity provides food and play facilities for the few children there, but most of the residents are young men and they seem bored by their stay. On our visit volunteers were also cleaning the trailers – mopping the floor while some young men still lay in bed. Others make their way around mid-day out of the hostel to walk to nearby Calais. The police on guard do not hinder their coming and going so there is nothing to stop anyone staying out and trying his luck in finding a passage to England. One reason why so many of the residents were still in bed towards noon may be that they had been down at the docks during the night.

As usual, the majority of those at Sangatte are young men. They all claim to come from Kosovo, mainly from Jacova (Djakovica) on the Albanian border where there was heavy fighting during the war. Some paid go-betweens at refugee camps in Albania and Macedonia for their passage out (normally through Albania itself). Only one man from Kosovska Mitrovica understood Serbian, the others did not, which may explain why there is a strong suspicion that many of the 'Kosovars' are, in fact, from Albania itself. Despite the boycott of all things Serb in the province over the past 10 years, Serbian was still the language for communication with the authorities. However, as most of them have no documentation whatsoever it is difficult to prove from where exactly they originate.

Frank reasons for wanting to come to Britain

When asked for their reasons for trying to get into Britain, all said that they wanted to come to Britain to work. There was no talk whatsoever of political persecution. They showed great faith in the Prime Minister, Tony Blair who was repeatedly referred to as their "friend". They believed that Tony Blair had promised to look after them – certainly a forgivable impression derived from the Prime Minister's high-profile visits to refugee camps in Macedonia during the war. Some claimed to have family and friends in the UK. Others were quite open about the fact that they would try to bribe truck drivers to carry them illegally to the UK. They seemed able to find the money to pay the bribes. They had already often paid well over a thousand Deutsche Marks to reach Calais.

French police guard the hanger but the refugees are free to leave. Late at night we observed two young men from Sangatte down by the lorry park at the docks where they were, presumably, looking for transport. Although the French immigration authorities are supposed to be co-operating with their counterparts in Britain to stop the trade there were no police around the docks while we were there. Many feel that the French are insincere and are happy to 'solve the problem' locally by pushing it on elsewhere.

There were more women and children at the hospital in rue Valmy in Calais itself. There was little here for people to do, but the conditions were clean and well-maintained. BHHRG interviewed several young men who said they were from Kosovo. Again, the absence of documentation and the vagueness of their life histories gave rise to the suspicion that they were Albanian nationals. It seemed unlikely that the French authorities would be able to sort out the real Kosovar from the faux Albanian – one official at rue Valmy described the language used by the refugees as 'Kosovan'.

The few hundred people accommodated in these centres are probably the losers in the battle to reach the UK. Although many will make it through sheer persistence, their more canny compatriots will have found a quicker and more hassle-free way to get there. The French authorities are all too aware that the mafia gangs and people smugglers which operate along the coastline slip through their fingers.

Dover, Great Britain

It is widely accepted by experts in Italy, that Albania is the outlet for most of the people smuggling that is now taking place. However, when former president Berisha attempted to control smugglers in 1997 his government was brought down by a strange alliance of mafia gangs and former Communists with, many believed, covert American help.

that Britain is the El Dorado for asylum seekers. It is not difficult to see why. While countries like Italy, France and Germany offer some financial assistance only the United Kingdom provides a full raft of social security benefits, including housing, to those claiming to flee political persecution.

Britain has a welter of legislation dealing with asylum and immigration which all political parties agree should be streamlined to speed up asylum applications and deter illegal entrants. New legislation contained in the 1999 Asylum and Immigration Bill should be enacted soon. Under its proposals asylum seekers will be given vouchers rather than money to cover their costs and they will be more widely dispersed around the UK than is presently the case so as to prevent tensions arising when people are concentrated in one particular place.

However, the principal remains that those requesting asylum will be able to move freely about the country while their applications are considered. As of now it can take up to 5 years for a decision to be made - there are supposedly some c.80,000 cases in the pipeline.

The figures for asylum seekers have grown considerably in the past year. The three-month average for May, June and July 1999 was 6,600 of those who applied after arriving in Britain - more than 1050 were from the former Yugoslavia, in other words, Kosovo. The successful conclusion of the war, the expulsion of the Serbs and the presence of Kfor troops has not deterred the Kosovans from leaving. Far from it, more seem to be on the move than was the case when they were, allegedly, the victims of Serb persecution. Included in the overall figures are 150 from Poland - supposedly a model member of the Council of Europe. Otherwise, Somalis, Iraqi Kurds and Afghans provide the highest number. Britain also has a constant trickle of Czech and Slovak gypsies arriving at Dover. Czech and Albanian are the common languages of the immigration services.

As with other countries, the official figures given for asylum seekers has to be treated with caution. Many of those who enter illegally never get caught. Through connections of one sort or another they enter into the mainstream of British life. Those who come through the system are accommodated along Britain's south coast, adjacent to the port of entry which is usually Dover. Others go to London where local authorities often move them back to the south coast where seedy boarding houses provide cheap accommodation.

Britain provides a raft of legal and social support to the asylum seeker. BHRG visited the offices of Refugee Link an independent organization that operates with government funding within the precincts of the port of Dover. The offices were full of a variety of people seeking assistance with matters like social security payments. It also puts people in contact with friends and relatives in the UK. It is worth bearing in mind that, despite the number present that day, people only visit the organization on a voluntary basis -many others will go their own way unaided.

Refugee Link also provides fast-track English language lessons to asylum seekers. A class was in progress on the day of our visit consisting of about 20 young men - mainly Afghan and Iraqi Kurds. Their manifest diligence brought sharply into focus the faults of the present British asylum laws. Would it not be better to acknowledge the fact that most asylum seekers want to build a better life through hard work and allow some form of controlled immigration to meet the need? Asylum itself should be kept as the last resort for those facing genuine political persecution, something that proper information should be able to confirm or deny without too many difficulties.

Violence involving asylum seekers

In November 1997 violent confrontations broke out between pro and anti immigration groups in Dover after a summer in which several hundred Czech and Slovak gypsies had arrived in the town seeking political asylum. Since then the situation has calmed down only to re-ignite alarmingly on the evenings of 13th and 14th August when several white youths were attacked with Stanley knives by groups of immigrant youths at a local funfair in Dover. Some of the injuries sustained were severe - in one case a white youth needed 175 stitches. Women are not immune: a 13-year-old girl had 48 stitches after being caught up in the attack.

It seems that local boys had taunted the foreigners. However, many saw the incident as a nightmare scenario that had been in the making for some time. Dover is a small, impoverished port of 40,000 people. The presence of 1000 immigrants in the town where they are housed in bed and breakfast accommodation should, by rights, pass unnoticed. This is not the case: the immigrants are seen as compounding the problems of blight and unemployment that disfigure this coastal town.

Most are accommodated along Folkestone Road one of the main thoroughfares out of the town where an atmosphere of poverty and menace are all too palpable. It is hard to see how life in these dismal boarding houses can be preferable to the reception centres provided by the Italians. But the British are unlikely to follow this path. During what became known as the 'Great Storm' in 1987 a boat commandeered by the Home Office to house asylum seekers broke from its moorings. Since then, nothing of this kind has been proposed again.

The authorities are sensitive about the events of that August weekend. It was impossible to find out the nationality of the perpetrators of the funfair violence either from the national press or local people. On the one hand, the authorities (and the police in particular) are afraid of being labelled 'racist' and at the national level there is unease that foreign policy adventures like Kosovo could all too soon be seen as the cause of an influx of young, male immigrants who are, ultimately, the main cause of any trouble that occurs not only in Dover but also in other parts of the country.

The situation is amply highlighted by the position of Nick Hudson, editor of the local newspaper the immigration issue for some time - many would say in an inflammatory *Folkestone Herald*. The *Herald* and its sister paper the *Dover Express* have been criticized for their coverage of the issue. Hudson himself was memorably quoted as referring to the refugees in Dover as "human sewage" a remark which he refuses to disown but which has come back to haunt him.

He claims to have been "gagged" by the papers' proprietors, even during the August events. Finally, angry letters from local people were printed presumably because of the outcry over the August violence. Hudson says that the local police authorities would dearly like to charge him for antiracist offences - the local MP, Gwyn Prosser has complained to the police about him twice and he has already been threatened with prosecution under s.19 of the Public Order Act. Ironically, Hudson himself has been the victim of intimidation with threatening phone calls and bricks thrown through his windows.

Obviously, the issue of freedom of speech is very much alive here. No doubt, the authorities would say they have to play a careful balancing act between preserving civil order and allowing the press to report freely on local concerns like immigration. However, it may not be wise to persistently push the issue under the carpet: there are many violent and disaffected British youths who may take matters into their own hands and who would find support from local, normally law abiding people who feel they have no other outlet for their concerns.

CONCLUSION

The sight of hundreds of thousands of refugees fleeing their homeland was the defining spectacle of the Kosovo crisis. However, like previous post-Cold War crises such as the Kurdish exodus in 1991 following the end of the Gulf War, Allied victory has not resolved the

problem of displacement, it has just altered the parameters. The return of so many refugees to Kosovo has not stemmed the flow of would-be migrants, some from Kosovo others claiming to be from the province. They have joined the existing tide from other places.

Despite the existence of dictatorships and persecuting regimes, few of the arrivals in southern Italy, let alone those who make their way through safe countries like France to Britain, have serious claims for asylum. Only the Roma refugees from Kosovo formed a clearly persecuted group in the observers' opinion. In practice it is those with the money to pay people-smugglers and with the daring to take the risks involved _ primarily young men _ who make up the bulk of asylum-seekers.

Away from immigration officials, these young men are perfectly willing to explain their economic motivation for coming to Western Europe. Unfortunately, Western European states do not recognise self-improvement as a legitimate reason for admission. In order to gain admittance young men who might well have the energy and initiative, and often the education, to find jobs and contribute to society have to perjure themselves and pretend to be victims of persecution. Since they are often already beholden to criminal organizations for their clandestine transport to Britain, this incentive to lie can only encourage contempt for the law of their adopted country.

Instead of continuing the increasingly farcical and dishonest asylum system, EU and other affluent West European states should consider blanket rejections of appeals for refugee status from a "white list" of states and by those clearly passing from one EU state to another. At the same time, the EU should consider adopting a rational regulated immigration and work permit system. In the absence of a coordinated policy by the EU and countries like Switzerland, Great Britain should adopt clear new policies.

The preservation of the right to asylum for genuine refugees is an important obligation for any civilized state. Public support for the duty to provide for refugees can best be maintained by making clear distinctions between the deserving and undeserving applicants. Many of the problems found across Europe with absconding or unregistered asylum-seekers and migrants could be reduced by a willingness to offer immigration and working rights to candidates who meet clear criteria.

Much of the illegality and crime associated (not least in the public mind) with the exponential growth in asylum applications combined with the Home Office's inability to process the results could be avoided if Britain and her partners adopted policies which permitted immigration or periods of work which could be readily regulated precisely because the migrants would have fewer incentives to live illegally and on the fringes of society.

Such a system would of course require enforcement. At present, the authorities across Western Europe often talk tough but in practice avoid dealing with the issue of bogus asylum-seekers, treating genuine refugees on a par with illegal immigrants, and hoping that the problem will move elsewhere.