

## Refugees and internally displaced persons

**T**he wars in South East Europe over the past decade have created a wave of refugees. Some have crossed borders and live in terrible conditions in other countries; others are internally displaced persons who simply no longer have homes—and independent lives—of their own. Many have managed to keep their families together, but others have lost parents, spouses, and children, either through attacks on civilians, disease, or, in the least traumatic manner, immigration.

Inevitably, the existence of so many internally displaced persons and refugees has led to enormous social, economic and political pressures in the regions where they have ended up. In many places, long-time residents—themselves struggling to adjust to life under new and often harsh conditions—have not welcomed their presence. Politicians often seek to bolster their popularity by promoting resentment against them among the local population.

Journalists can play an important role in helping to ease rather than exacerbate tensions. Here are some ways to do that:

- ★ Make an assessment of how your media outlet has addressed the issue of refugees in order to identify gaps in coverage. Do they only appear in stories about crime, for example? Or have you included material about ways in which they are trying to help themselves, ways in which they are seeking to improve their lives? Have you written stories in which politicians or local residents complain about the problems associated with refugees without allowing them an opportunity to respond?

- ★ Much of the coverage of refugees inevitably focuses on crime. It may be true that crime is a problem, but it is important to address the context when you write about it. What is the situation with unemployment among the refugees? What traumas have they suffered? How many children do they have to feed? This does not mean you have to find excuses for criminal activity, but you should attempt to describe some of the desperation with which they are forced to live.

- ★ Spend some time in a refugee camp or squatters' area in your region and talk to as many people as you can. Write an article describing what you see. What are the conditions like? What kind of homes are people living in? What about running water? Are their children able to attend school of any kind? What kind of food is available?

- ★ Make contact with non-governmental organisations, whether local or international, that work with or represent the interests of refugees. Find out what they are doing to help out. Ask them what are the major issues currently facing refugees in your area. Ask them to arrange for you to spend a day with a family so you really understand what their life is like.

★ Find one or more refugees who have managed to work their way out of their difficulties. How did they manage to find employment? A home? Food? Educational possibilities for their children? Ask them how they overcame their circumstances and if they have any advice for other families.

★ Write a profile of a refugee who is devoting himself to improving the life of others in the same situation. Has someone organised a school on-site? If so, spend a day in the classroom and describe it. Is there someone who is helping refugees find jobs? Is anyone helping them locate relatives they may have lost track of in the chaos of war and upheaval?

★ Write a story about the psychological and other health issues confronting refugees as they seek to reintegrate into society. Ask doctors how many of them are suffering from post-traumatic stress and other emotional difficulties. Are there diseases that are particularly widespread among refugees, and what steps are officials taking—or not—to address the problem?

## Case studies

This story is an example of the xenophobic attitude of elements of the British press toward refugees and asylum seekers. The piece essentially paints the asylum seekers, who after all are desperately trying to find a new home for themselves and their families because of terrible conditions at home, as villains who simply do not appreciate everything that Britain is supposedly doing for them. But except for a representative of an NGO, the reader is offered no information from the detainees' point of view.

### 9. a) **Asylum policy goes up in smoke — So this is how they thanks us: Rioting detainees start £35m blaze**

The headline immediately portrays the detainees as “ungrateful people” who basically deserve their fate. Including the estimated damage in the subhead is an effective way to further prejudice reader opinion against them.

The luxury facilities could not have been better at the showpiece £100m detention centre—but asylum seekers still burned it to the ground.

A mob—attempting a mass breakout—destroyed two plush wings which were only opened last month.

The £35 million bill for the damage would pay for a new hospital, or 1,400 junior doctors, 1,500 police or 2,400 nurses. And the trouble cast doubt on Britain's policy of handling asylum detainees.

Riot cops, guards and fire-fighters battled from 8pm on Thursday until dawn yesterday to control the fire and rampage at Yarl's Wood centre in Clapham, Beds.

Today police were still unsure how many refugees were on the run. Up to 15 were thought to be missing after 12 were arrested. They stole keys to open gates. Three detainees, two cops and a Group Four officer were hurt in the riot.

The centre houses 384 asylum seekers-most waiting for deportation.

Facilities include eight prayer rooms, 10 classes with computers, shops and libraries with books in 40 languages. There are gyms, pool tables and sports areas. Detainees first started a fire in an

◀ The first two sentences continue the theme of ingratitude in the face of the generosity of the British, who have provided “luxury” accommodations in a “showpiece” facility with “plush” wings.

◀ The journalist should explain who estimated the cost of the damage, and how. Calculating what else could have been done with the money is certainly an effective journalistic strategy but in this case it simply furthers the article's goal of inflaming public opinion against the asylum-seekers by, in effect, blaming them for a shortage of doctors and nurses.

Since they are waiting for deportation, it is unclear what reason they would have to be grateful toward Britain.

◀ Some more context—who they are, where they come from, what they are fleeing—would be useful. The journalist does not appear to have made any effort to talk to any of the detainees about their situation or the conditions under which they were being held.

administrative block and threw missiles at security staff. Police arrived within minutes and eventually 200 cops were called in, along with 20 fire crews. A guard was hurt jumping from the first floor to escape flames. CCTV cameras were smashed and records destroyed. Four women nurses were reportedly locked in a room by detainees while the building burned. Fires were then started in the Charlie and Delta wings, which were gutted. Rioters were herded outside by cops. The other two wings, Alpha and Bravo—which are separated by a road—were evacuated. Villagers nearby were warned to lock up houses and sheds where people could hide out.

Fire chief Clive Walsh revealed the Home Office had ignored fire brigade requests for a sprinkler system to be installed. The riot was thought to have started after a woman of 55 was allegedly handcuffed as she waited to go to hospital.

Mike Gilmour, of the Campaign to Stop Arbitrary Detentions, said: “Detainees have suggested this was the final straw to spark it off.”

Group Four denied the woman was handcuffed. Detainees were yesterday sent to other centres.

◀ Is this a typical example of how people were treated at the detention centre? It would be useful to learn more details.

*The Sun*, London, 16 February 2002

This article is a thoughtful portrait of how the members of one family are coping with the dislocation caused by leaving behind their home and their country. In its presentation of details of their lives and a discussion of their hopes and fears—combined with a fair amount of the broader political and social context—the piece offers a sympathetic account of the family’s complicated dilemma. In this way, it suggests a real alternative to the kind of blame-the-refugee material that frequently appears in Western as well as Eastern media. And it also describes the refugee plight without at the same time demonising the Serbs, which is also a common and not particularly useful approach taken when addressing the issue.

## 9. b) **Albanian refugee family struggles in limbo: Evacuees are caught between making a new life and dealing with the old as they wait for word on when they can return to their war-torn home**

**A**s tens of thousands of his fellow ethnic Albanians rushed back into Kosovo last week, Besnik Vlashi peered into a cramped San Fernando Valley duplex, its dark interior as much a mystery as his own future.

Besnik and the rest of his family, airlifted to the United States in the past few weeks with about 7,600 other Kosovo refugees, are spending their days making a new life here: finding a home, learning English, getting jobs.

But although the peace agreement brokered earlier this month opened the doors for the return of refugees in and around Kosovo, it also marked the start of a new and upsetting period of uncertainty for the Vlasis and their fellow evacuees.

The refugees’ initial relief at arriving safely in America has been replaced by more ragged emotions, from frustration at the unrelenting newness of their lives to grief slowly emerging from long-buried memories. “When we first came, we were trying to find out where we were and what was going on,” said Besnik, 17. “Now, the memories are building up.”

The uncertainty will not be resolved any time soon. As the United Nations and aid agencies scramble to cope with refugees returning to

Quotes like this one personalise the dilemma of the refugees by allowing them to give voice to their feelings, frustrations and concerns. Many stories discuss them only in terms of crimes or other social problems and interview only authorities or angry citizens rather than refugees themselves.

Kosovo, they have yet to come up with any definitive plan to deal with the 88,000 refugees airlifted to 29 countries.

Further complicating the picture are the estimated thousands of refugees who still want to come to the United States, the peace accord unable to wipe out their memories of a homeland ravaged by slaughter and rape.

Several nations, including England and Germany, announced last week they will no longer accept Kosovo refugees, now that the bombing campaign is over.

As a result, some immigration experts predict that the U.S. may soon become the sole country accepting Kosovo refugees. At least 5,000 more are awaiting evacuation to the U.S., according to government figures.

"There is almost a daily debate going on discussing what to do," said Panos Moutziz, a Washington, D.C.-based spokesman for the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees.

Refugee groups are pushing to make sure the door to the U.S. remains open, especially for refugees with medical problems too complex for the devastated health care system in Kosovo to handle, and for those severely traumatized by rape or loss of family members.

"We want to make sure that refugees in need of third-country resettlement have that opportunity," said Leonard Glickman, executive vice president of the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society, which, with the Jewish Federation of Los Angeles, helped bring the Vlashis to the U.S.

One thing is sure: Refugees like the Vlashis who chose to flee to the U.S. rather than remain in miserably crowded camps and private homes in Macedonia and Albania are at the bottom of the list for resettlement assistance.

Those in most urgent need of attention are the tens of thousands of internally displaced refugees who hid in the mountains and forests within Kosovo, lacking food or shelter.

Next are the hundreds of thousands who have spent months in crowded and unsanitary refugee camps, many of them within sight of Kosovo, a

province of Serbia, the dominant republic of Yugoslavia.

Expatriated refugees like the Vlashis can't expect governmental help to return home until next spring at the earliest, immigration and U.N. officials predict.

Technically, the refugees can leave of their own accord. But if they wait until the U.S. government declares Kosovo safe—a determination that could take months—they are guaranteed a free plane trip home.

If the refugees decide to stay in the U.S., they will be charged for the airfare to travel to this country, about \$3,000 for a family of four. Despite the price tag, many experts predict that most of the refugees here will remain.

In part, that's because of better services offered in the U.S. But it is also because of a modern tradition in Kosovo Albanian culture to work abroad and send money home. Some estimate that as many as one in four ethnic Albanians work abroad.

"Common sense says that, once they get here and get jobs and kids in school, more and more will remain," said Mark Franken, executive director for migration and refugee services for the U.S. Catholic Conference.

The Vlashis said they want to return, though they are prepared for a long wait. But frustrations abound. Chief among them is their own independence. After weeks of living with their host family, they feel they have become a burden—despite assurances to the contrary by their hosts, Bobbie and Steven Black of Calabasas.

They have had trouble finding an apartment for their family of six for around \$1,000 a month. The high cost of housing and small units in the U.S. caught them off guard. They are not used to the idea of paying so much for so little, compared with what they can get for the same money in Kosovo.

"We feel like we're being a burden," said Fatime Vlasi, 47, the mother of the family, which also includes daughters Lumnie, 22, Ganimete, 21, and Fitore, 7. "We'd like to have a place of our own."

◀ This article would have benefited from more information about their hosts. Why have they decided to host the family? What are their feelings about the situation? It would be good to offer readers some insight into ordinary people who view refugees as a group worthy of help and sympathy rather than one that just causes major social problems.

Another source of worry is the father of the family, Hazir Vlashi, 47. He was separated from the family during the evacuation, though he is expected to arrive from Macedonia any day.

And finally, there are memories of what they have seen and experienced.

One daughter walked through snowy mountains for 15 hours to reach safety. Hazir Vlashi was severely beaten by Serbs, family members said. They have lost contact with numerous friends.

"We're continually sad because of the situation," Besnik said.

Refugee experts are expecting to see more psychological problems as time passes.

Unlike most refugees, who spent months and even years adjusting to their situations before coming to the United States, the Kosovo refugees were ripped from their homes and deposited abroad in a matter of weeks.

Processing the trauma will take time, experts say.

"Various psychological problems are expected to happen," Glickman said. "It absolutely will present challenges."

*Los Angeles Times*, Woodland Hills, 21 June 1999

◀ Presenting details about their experiences is useful in creating sympathy for refugees rather than antipathy and anger toward them. Many stories appear to be designed to stir up resentment against refugees by ignoring the reasons they have fled and portraying them simply as greedy new arrivals who receive far more than they deserve.