



# **CROSSING BORDERS**

international refugee campaign

**RESOURCE PACK**

**PART ONE**

**SCI**

**A SOLIDARITY & PUBLIC AWARENESS RAISING CAMPAIGN**

**BY SERVICE CIVIL INTERNATIONAL**

**SCI & REFUGEES**

**1**

**A refugee** is a person who is outside his or her habitual place of residence and is unable or unwilling to return due to a well founded fear of the contravention of his or her human rights.

*~ SCI's Refugee Definition*

# Part 1: SCI & Refugees

## Contents

Introduction .....	1
Political Statement .....	3
Crossing Borders: An SCI Campaign .....	4
The First Year .....	6
Refugees & SCI In Asia	
Part 1: Summary .....	8
Part 2: Case Studies .....	9
~ SCI & Refugees in Sri Lanka	
~ SCI & Refugees in India	
Refugee Work in Slovenia .....	14

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# Introduction

In 1970 there were 2.5 million refugees in the world. In 1980 there were 11 million. By the end of 1993, there were 19 million refugees, plus an estimated 24 million people displaced within their own country.

In recent times the issue of refugees and more particularly the hosting of refugees, has become extremely controversial in Western Europe. The various legislations and procedures necessary to obtain access to industrialised countries are becoming increasingly more restrictive. Refugees are finding themselves victims of verbal and physical aggression from right wing tendencies within European societies.

On a global level the situation is no less complicated. Tens of millions of people, sometimes entire communities, "choose" to leave their place of residence. Quite a number of them will

be recognised as refugees and will therefore receive some protection. But many more of them will never be granted refugee status and they will probably have to live within a social vacuum for years. Although western countries only give shelter to a very small percentage of the global number of refugees there are growing tendencies which seek to prevent the right to asylum for those confronted by abuses of their basic human rights.

A human being does not decide to leave his/her habitual place of residence without reason. Nobody volunteers to take enormous risks with unpredictable consequences. To face possible hunger, persecution, humiliation, threatening anonymous phone calls, the need to hide, disappearance, torture, political murders of one's family members and friends within one's community, the feeling of





being totally powerless because one has lost all control over one's situation; all this leads to an unbearable tension and a paralysing fear. At a certain moment one takes the decision to flee, sometimes immediately, sometimes after a long period of doubt. People flee because they do not see any possibility of remaining where they are, because their very life is under threat.

At this moment, there are around 20 million recognised refugees in the world. They respond to a set of criteria which have been defined in international conventions. They are protected by those conventions.

An even greater number of people, although their number is hard to estimate, have fled without (as of yet) being recognised as refugees. These people may have left their country to flee from poverty, caused by the growing economic gap between the rich and poor countries. They may have fled from the violation of their human rights, and persecution based on race, ethnic and social background, religion or political opinion. They may have left their homes to flee from war or natural disasters such as desertification or deforestation.

The fact that individuals, communities and people move is part of the dynamics of history. From ancient times there have been immigrants in our communities and they have contributed to our society, our economy, our culture and indeed to our own identity.

As recently as the seventies there seemed to be a feeling of solidarity towards people who had been forced to leave their country, and the right to ask for asylum was considered to be one of the hallmarks of our democracy. Now that this is being undermined, Service Civil International, being an international peace movement, wants to take on its responsibility and contribute to the defence of the right of all to seek asylum. We believe that each person, who is outside his/her habitual place of residence, and is not able or willing to return for many or various reasons, has the right to be protected and hosted. In its international refugee campaign, SCI wants to reduce the causes that create refugees and to eliminate borders, and wants to fight the human rights abuses that refugees are confronted with.





# Political Statement

SCI believes that refugees are a consequence of actions and laws of oppressive regimes, governments; conflicts (both man made or otherwise); and are a result of the international community's failure to intervene in time to prevent such situations:

1. SCI condemns oppressive regimes, governments and other elements which apply economic, political, cultural and gender pressures resulting in the displacement of people.
2. SCI condemns the production and sale of arms and munitions and every institution supporting the arms trade.
3. SCI expresses its support for refugees in their struggle to achieve human, economic, political, cultural and gender rights.
4. SCI appeals to the international community to improve the situation of refugees and to protect their fundamental rights (as stated in The Geneva Convention) and to work to eliminate the causes responsible for refugee situations.
5. SCI considers it to be the responsibility of the international community to inform the public of the global and local causes of refugee situations in order to counteract negative attitudes and hostile reactions, and to enable positive integration between refugees and their host communities.
6. SCI demands that the non-refoulement right, as stated in The Geneva Convention, be practised by all governments.
7. SCI encourages the international community to widen its criteria for refugee status in line with the SCI definition.
8. SCI strongly believes that the refugee issue should be firmly placed upon the global political agenda with a special focus on the most vulnerable groups such as women, children and the elderly.

In line with SCI philosophy, we believe that all actions mentioned above must be undertaken in a non-violent manner.



# "CROSSING BORDERS"

## An SCI Campaign

One of the important aims of Service Civil International is to organise North/South awareness raising campaigns for development education. The specificity of SCI, on the national as well as on the international level, is its network of branches, partners and grassroot organisations. Each branch has the possibility to work with educational materials designed for activities with different groups. In the last couple of years, two campaigns have taken place with a focus on Namibia. The first campaign started in 1988: we bought a South African army vehicle which was transformed in a medical lorry to help popular health projects for Namibians in Southern Angola. In those days, Namibia was still occupied by South Africa, although the United Nations had condemned this occupation some years previously.

In 1991, when Namibia had already obtained its independence, we started a new campaign, focusing on the new needs of the country, the role of young people in the struggle against apartheid and racism, but also on the more general situation in the whole region of Southern Africa. A bus was transformed in a mobile educational center with information, videos, games, expositions etc. which then made a tour in western and eastern Europe over a two year period.

Those Namibia campaigns allowed us to strengthen our network of grassroot partners; youth organisations, play schemes, schools, literacy groups etc. and to create links with different types of organisations.

In early 1993 a proposal came from our Asian branches; they suggested that SEED, on behalf of SCI as a whole, should adopt the theme of refugees as the focus for our development educational work for the coming years. This is not such a surprising suggestion; apart from the fact that the situation of refugees requires immediate

action, it is also a common area of work for most of our Asian branches, and for some has been so for several decades.

SCI-India has a long tradition of work with refugees, since the partition of the sub-continent in the days of independence. They have also been involved in programmes with refugees from Tibet, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, and for the last decade with refugees from Afghanistan. SCI-India is the implementing partner of the UN in managing two centers in Delhi where Afghan refugees have access to training, literacy courses and health services. The most recent extension to this area of work is the lobbying of the government to defend the rights of what they call "victims of development projects", (peoples who flee the environmentally catastrophic consequences of large dam construction, nuclear powered electricity stations, etc.).

SCI-Sri Lanka works with victims of the political conflict between the different communities within the country, especially in the northern and eastern parts. They offer concrete help to refugee communities (housing, etc.), and they defend the rights of refugees and displaced people. This year, SCI has initiated a major self-help programme with displaced peoples in the Puttalam region with the assistance of The European Communities.

The Nepalese branch, still relatively young, has started to work on this theme. They are involved in supporting Bhutanese refugees who are being chased out of their country.

SCI-Bangladesh works in similar circumstances but with the Muslim communities who have had to leave Myanmar.

SEED organised an international seminar in the European Youth Center, Strasbourg in January 1994, where Asian and European branches exchanged their ideas and experiences, and where SCI committed itself to work for and with refugees, and to organise development education activities on the theme. We agreed on the items listed on the following page.



## SCI Refugee Definition

SCI decided to try to come up with a new and improved definition of "refugee". This because it was felt that the UN definition excluded large groups of refugees by lacking reference to sex, sexual orientation, class, and not taking into consideration being refugee within one's own country.

Therefore SCI adopted the following broader definition: *"A refugee is a person who is outside his or her habitual place of residence and is unable or unwilling to return due to a well founded fear of the contravention of his or her human rights"*.

## Aims And Objectives Of The Campaign

In its refugee campaign SCI aims to work towards the reduction of the causes that create refugees and the elimination of the barriers and human rights abuses that confront them. In the refugee campaign, SCI branches want to:

1. **Develop concrete actions with refugees to improve their living conditions and environment by:**
  - supporting refugees who live in our countries
  - supporting refugees who live in other countries (e.g. through workcamps in affected countries)
  - helping refugees to raise their voice in the public debate and decision making processes
  - helping refugees to become aware of their rights
  - facilitating the interaction between refugees and their host community.
2. **Campaign for fairer legislation and policies by:**
  - actively defending the rights of refugees
  - working against any present and future restrictive legislation and policies.
3. **Raise awareness on and express solidarity with refugees by:**
  - creating internal mechanisms for development education and awareness raising within SCI (e.g. through information and sensibilisation sessions on each workcamp) spreading information among the general public about the global and local situation of refugees
  - breaking down stereotypes, countering growing racism in Europe and tackling the often negative image of refugees.

In these different activities, SCI will have a special focus on the most vulnerable groups among refugees, such as women, children and the elderly. With these activities, SCI wants to improve the communication between Asian and European branches and structures and strengthen the international dimension of SEED. SCI hopes to work closely together with other NGOs and rele-

vant organisations. SCI branches and structures represented in Strasbourg come from Asia and Europe. We do realise, however, that the majority of refugees are living on the African continent. SCI-SEED dedicates itself to incorporating to this African dimension and to trying to involve our African partners in this campaign.



## The First Year

After years of preparation and discussion, SCI's "Crossing Borders" campaign to give concrete support to refugees, to raise public awareness on issues affecting them and to lobby for their rights, really started with a seminar in Strasburg, January 1994. At that seminar we discussed in detail our aims and objectives, our methods and our experiences in the field of refugees. We also had an opportunity to listen to and to discuss with guest speakers.

That seminar was followed up at the branch level in different ways: some branches set up their own refugee campaign working group which was responsible for organising workcamps on the theme of the campaign (15 refugee workcamps in total in Europe). Eight branches have sent volunteers to programmes in refugee camps, and six

branches campaigned for a fairer legislation for refugees within their own countries. Almost all branches organised awareness raising activities / programmes / workshops via a study element on the theme of the campaign on workcamps, or via educational activities aimed at a general public. To make this possible, branches used the resource pack which was produced last year before the workcamp season. Seven branches produced their own educational materials, and six organised special training events to facilitate their volunteers work with refugees. Most of the branches established links and forms of cooperation with field organisations working with refugees, and nine branches directly involved refugees living in their own community.







Afterwards an evaluation was held at the European Committee Meeting in Calella, late November 1994, followed by a half-day workshop. Different elements of the campaign were discussed and evaluated. Some branches and individuals raised the point of the absence of a common political platform of the campaign. Since the workshop of Calella was not the appropriate place to decide on a political platform, we prepared a deeper discussion for the SEED Annual Meeting of 1995.

The SEED Annual Meeting was held in February 1995 in Kandy, Sri Lanka. There it was decided that the drafting and spreading of a political statement is an important step in the process of an international campaign. There was a general feeling that, although the activities set up by different branches were addressing local needs and problems, the whole issue of refugees is undoubtedly linked with a much broader North-South issue. That discussion led us to a common political platform which you can find on page 3 of this booklet.

The programme and the meetings in Sri Lanka have certainly had a very strong mobilising effect for the campaign. The fact that we were able to visit the Puttalam project, where SCI-Sri Lanka works in a

simple but effective way to support Muslim refugees who have been chased out of other areas of the country, has been a very important grassroots experience for all the participants. This has proved very important for the participants.

In the meantime, the second summer of the campaign is currently being prepared now with more workcamps on the theme of refugees, plus a lot of attention being devoted to the involvement of medium-term volunteers in our direct work with refugees.

In appreciation of the greater number of activities planned and in response to the branches requests, Part Three of this resource packet "Pedagogical Tools" has been produced by SCI branches to fill a vacuum within existing educational materials. It is specifically designed to engage a young public, such as that attracted to SCI activities and to introduce them to the campaign theme and to enable them to address the issue in a practical and proactive manner.

Since 1993 SCI has steadily increased its grassroots activities in support of refugees. We trust that with the help of this revised resource pack you will find that your branch or local group can continue this important work.



# Refugees & SCI In Asia

## Part 1: Summary

A summary of the work of three Asian branches on refugee issues.

### SCI-Sri Lanka

SCI-Sri Lanka is continuing its involvement with the work of the displaced people in Puttalam. In 1994 two of the many refugee camps in the area caught fire. The displaced people fell from the frying pan into the fire. However, SCI and other local NGO's went into action immediately and now new huts have been built. The generous funds which came from OXFAM in Sri Lanka made this possible. But, the big question is: how long will they have to struggle?

Last summer as usual a workcamp was organised in the refugee camp area. Eight volunteers from Europe who were there under the summer exchange program and more than an equal number of local volunteers participated in this workcamp. The encouraging factor was the participation of the refugees in all the activities along with SCI volunteers. The presence of SCI volunteers not only helped with the manual work, but was also a big moral boost for those suffering from mental trauma. The children in the camp enjoyed the games and songs which the volunteers especially the Europeans, introduced, and the women enjoyed the lively stories which were told to them in English but mixed with local and sign languages. The medical program carried out during this period has also been very useful.

The Sri Lanka refugee situation and SCI's involvement are further described in the case study on page 9.

### SCI-India

In keeping with the idea of the campaign, SCI-India had organised one workcamp and study session on the theme "refugees". The outcome of this workcamp and the study session has not yet been fully evaluated. But initial indications are that it has been very successful. SCI-India still continues its work with the Afghan refugees involving the provision of vocational training and language classes.

The refugee situation in India and SCI's involvement are further described in the case study on page 10.

### SCI-Bangladesh

In the beginning of August 1994, SCI-Bangladesh organised a workshop on the theme "refugees" for their local unit members. This was a joint effort of SCI-Bangladesh and the Asian Coordination. The workshop was attended by about 20 participants with one local resource person. At the end of the workshop the following topics had been dealt with:

- a) Refugee issues in Bangladesh and the causes behind them:
  - the Chakma issue,
  - the Rohingya issue:

(An analysis of this issue is presented in the article "The case of the Rohingyas in Bangladesh" in Part Two of this Resource Pack.)

- b) What can SCI-Bd do in the field of refugee-work? How to get organised to do so? And how to link up with the Crossing Borders campaign?



## Part 2: Case Studies

### SCI & Refugees In Sri Lanka

#### Background to the Muslim refugee problem:

The refugees who are living in the refugee camps around Puttalam are Muslims, who comprise 8% of the total population in Sri Lanka. An estimated 75,000 Muslims live in the Northern Province of Sri Lanka. The Tamil ethnic group is dominant numerically in this province, although in some districts and areas the Muslims are living in high concentration. Before 1990 the relationship between the Muslims and the Tamils was always cordial and friendly. In the conflict between the two major ethnic groups in Sri Lanka, Tamils and Sinhalese, the position of the Muslims was neutral, though they speak Tamil like the Tamils, while the Sinhalese speak Sinhala. The LTTE, the Tamil guerilla organisation, which has been engaged in a violent campaign aimed at achieving a separate Tamil state, had hoped that the Muslims would support them in their struggle. When the Muslims remained neutral they accused them of cooperating with the Sinhalese government and that all Muslims were traitors and enemies. On the 24th of October 1990, the LTTE announced publicly in the streets of the Muslim settlements in the Northern Province, that the Muslims must leave their homes, villages and towns, leaving all their valuables behind, or face death at the hands of LTTE-militants. The ultimatum was that Muslims should leave this region within 48 hours. The Muslims were helpless, the government forces who were fighting against the LTTE were located far away from this trouble spot. So a large number of Muslims fled their home in order to save their lives, while the LTTE looted the Muslim houses and took cash, jewellery and other valuables forcibly and often at gun point. Most of the Muslims fled their homes by sea in small boats and arrived at Puttalam and in other Muslim areas. They were housed in vacant school buildings and later transferred

to temporary huts built in the vicinity of the same village for the purpose of resettling these people. Now, five years later, the refugees are still living there.

#### The situation in the refugee camps in the Puttalam North Region:

The Puttalam district is located in the Northwest of Sri Lanka, at the border of Manner district, from where nearly 41,000 refugees came. Puttalam has a large concentration of local Muslims, which is one reason for the high percentage of refugees in the region (58%). SCI is working in these camps, located in the North of Puttalam town, a saline area where most of the salten fields are abandoned now. The majority of the refugees were immediately settled in these areas where the salty ground makes agriculture nearly impossible.

Some of the problems the refugees have to face in the camps:

- The huts are very small for sleeping and cooking and to accommodate all members of the family. No lights or mats are available.
- Overcrowding of huts: to accommodate as many refugees as possible in a small area of land, the huts were built close to each other and this has resulted in social, health and fire problems.
- Disease and health problems: Mosquitos breed in the stagnant water around the camps and malaria and brain fever are common. Human waste from the camps further aggravates the health problems and results in the spread of diarrhoea, eye infection and skin rash.
- Shortage of food: the government is providing free dry food rations, but the amount is inadequate, infants and children suffer particularly from a shortage of food. Besides, the displaced persons have lost cash and valuables to the LTTE and their other properties have been left abandoned, so that no financial resources are available for their survival in their new unfamiliar environment. Finding work in the Puttalam area is very difficult.



- Absence of basic needs: no drinking water is available on the saline soil, so refugees have to walk several miles to get drinking water. The Puttalam municipality provided a temporary water tank for one of the camps located on salty soil, but still there is not enough. There are also not enough lavatories in the camps.
- Absence of essential services: such as medical, counselling, schooling etc.

#### **The work of SCI in the refugee camps:**

The refugee project in Puttalam is one of the two long term projects of SCI-Sri Lanka, the other one is a school for mentally retarded children in Kandy.

One part of the project is the international workcamp which takes place in the Puttalam region every summer. SCI volunteers build huts out of palm bark for indigent families. Usually every family has to build their own hut for themselves and renew it every year. But if a widow is not in the position to build a hut for herself, SCI takes over. Besides the work itself the aim of SCI is to motivate the other refugees to help indigent families. SCI doesn't want to give only economic aid, (and as a small NGO SCI doesn't have the financial possibilities to do this), the aim is to work together in an international group, learning from each other. Also important is the solidarity with the refugees: since Western volunteers come to the refugee camps in order to work alongside the refugees and as the volunteers are showing their interest in the people, the refugees really feel that they and their fate have not been forgotten by the rest of the world.

Last summer SCI-Sri Lanka also started an agriculture project in the Puttalam North Region. The international volunteers began excavation work on a well for the irrigation of land for agriculture. Should it prove possible to cultivate some vegetables there, then some of the refugees would have a job in this project and moreover some food would be produced for them and their families.

## **SCI & Refugees In India**

### **The Status and Problems of Refugees in India**

As a developing country India continually faces the problem of large-scale influxes of refugees. Asylum seekers forming part of such large-scale influx situations are often confronted with difficulties in finding durable solutions such as voluntary repatriation, local settlement or resettlement in a third country. Large-scale influxes frequently create serious problems for states, with the result that certain states although committed to obtain durable solutions, have only the possibility of accepting asylum seekers without providing permanent settlement to these persons within India's borders.

It is therefore imperative to ensure that asylum seekers are fully protected in large-scale influx situations, to reaffirm the basic minimum standards and to establish effective arrangements in the context of international solidarity and burden sharing for assisting countries which receive a large number of asylum seekers.

India experienced a large-scale influx of refugees soon after the partition following independence during 1947, from former East Pakistan (now Bangladesh) and Pakistan. The government of India provided protection and security to these refugees. Tibetan refugees began pouring into India in the wake of the flight of his holiness the Dali Lama in 1959. The government of India decided to give them political asylum as well as assistance towards temporary resettlement while ensuring their separate ethnic and cultural identity. There are about 80,000 Tibetan refugees at present in India. Out of this, 68,000-69,000 persons have settled themselves either through self employment or with government's



assistance, under agricultural and handcraft programmes. The constant problem regarding Tibetan refugees has been their exact number in the country. The overall increase in the number of Tibetan refugees can be attributed to the following; natural growth, splitting of families, inclusion of self supporters, unaccounted for arrivals and deserters claiming a second dose of assistance. India is not a signatory to UNHCR 1951 Convention on Refugees, but it allows generosity subject to its own standard policy which can vary from time to time. Citizenship was given to refugees from Pakistan and East Pakistan automatically and likewise to those who entered India from Bangladesh before 31st March, 1971. Assistance was provided by allotting them land and other basic amenities like shelter, food, and education. The Indian government only gave refugee status to Tibetans and the Sri Lanka Tamils who entered India after July, 1983 onwards due to ethnic conflict in Sri Lanka. They have generally found India to be a safe place for refugees as it never denied protection and security to the victims who fall within the four basic definitions of a refugee, as contained in the 1951 UNHCR, on moral grounds. Having always been generous in receiving refugees and at the same time being a large country and being comparatively safe, India is therefore always potentially a landing place for refugees from neighbouring countries during times of war, conflicts or manmade or natural catastrophes.

The "Pull Factors" that trigger a flight of refugees have in a sense, been due to India's generosity, the level and type of assistance provided and/or improved economic opportunity. This has subsequently led to an attraction affect, where more refugees have chosen to move to India. In the 1980's these refugees came particularly from Iran and Afghanistan. Although the Indian government does not afford them official refugee status it does however allow them to stay in India until their fear of persecution has dissipated and the refugees voluntarily decide to go back to their country of origin.

### Root causes

The root causes for refugees fleeing to India are :

- Ethnic, racial, or religious divisions i.e. refugees from Pakistan, Tamil from Sri Lanka, Bangladesh. Buddhists of Chakma's from the Chittagong hill tracts in Bangladesh.
- Difficulties in creating a nation state within artificially created borders i.e. refugees from Pakistan, Tibet, East Pakistan, Tamil from Sri Lanka, Iran, Afghanistan.
- Conflict with a neighbouring country i.e. Indo-Chinese war in 1962 and flight of refugees from Tibet.
- Attempts to create a social revolution and the rise of a resultant opposition i.e. Iran and Afghanistan.

The total number of refugees in India on October 31, 1993 was 1,074,165 of which about 74,900 were in Tamil Nadu and 99,265 in Orissa. On September 6, 1993, a total number of 36,028 refugees have been repatriated back to Sri Lanka. The repatriation is allowed when refugees voluntarily decide to go back to their country of origin. The government of India permits UNHCR officials to decide on this. Apart from financial support, refugees are provided with medical facilities, transportation allowances, food and clothing after arrival.

### Displaced persons

There are many displaced persons in India who are refugees in their own country due to destructive development policies of the government. These people are thrown out from their place of normal residence through the construction of big dams or in the name of development. At present, there are 3 million internally displaced persons in India as a direct result of these kind of "projects". Coupled with refugees from Afghanistan the problem is staggeringly high and very serious.

Unless and until relief assistance is linked with long term development, this problem will simply aggravate the wider refugee issue. To undertake both of these tasks at the same time requires mobilisation of resources



and trained manpower for refugee work and the creation of a mass awareness raising programme.

### **SCI in the India context**

SCI undertook refugee rehabilitation work in Faridabad in 1947-48 following the declaration of Indian independence. SCI provided protection, psychological counselling, crowd control, provision of housing, road construction, primary health care, food and clothes distribution and involved refugees in the process of reshaping their future, to some of the millions of people crossed the border and took refuge at that time.

SCI-India took up relief assistance for the refugees from Tibet in 1962 and for those refugees who came during and after the creation of Bangladesh in 1971.

SCI-India is currently responsible for running the refugee projects in two centres in Delhi, which cater mainly for refugees from Afghanistan. More refugees of Indian origin from Afghanistan are pouring in following the fresh outbreak of violence in Kabul and neighbouring areas. There are, at present, more than 10,000 refugees being catered for in these two centres. Besides this there is medical, financial and personal support, vocational classes are organised for women where they can study dressmaking and tailoring and where the children attend a regular school. Some of the refugees themselves work at the centres and at the India Medical Sciences centre as interpreters and as assistant social workers aiding the doctors who work in these two centres.

### **Conclusion**

Most of the refugee work in the past was providing relief assistance and helping integration within the host country. No durable solutions were foreseen for new arrivals and therefore it has proven to be a very slow process in involving refugees in decision-making, in identifying the vulnerable groups i.e. women, children, old persons, handicapped refugees and women-headed single families. The dynamics of change that took place during and after the flight of the refugees and during the process of integration were not given much thought. Lack of trained staff and appropriate planning for long term development and finding

durable solution on a sustained manner have consistently been lacking.

Many case studies suggest that often the kind of assistance provided in the past affected or created conflicts between refugees and the local host population, especially those who are poor and underprivileged.

Ways need to be found to identify what kind of appropriate technical and vocational skills refugees need to obtain while residing in the host country according to their needs and backgrounds which will facilitate their return to their country or to a third country.

All this means that SCI should organise more workshops and training programs with priority in specific areas on refugees and displaced persons so that long term development with relief assistance, can be linked to finding a durable solution. In the process, we need to undertake regional and international efforts in a coordinated manner sharing the burden and the available resources within SCI.



# Refugee Work In Slovenia

(Below is a report from two volunteers who worked with refugees in the former Yugoslavia. First is a brief summary of their hosting branch's views on this form of voluntary service.)

Since 1992, MOST the Slovenian branch of SCI, has placed medium & long term volunteers in refugee camps. The main purpose of this kind of voluntary work is to actively fulfill the free time of the refugees and more importantly not just to provide some "services", but to include the refugees in the process of the preparation and performance of activities. Volunteers held different workshops based on their own experiences and skills and on the refugees' wishes. These workshops are designed in a way that ensures that the refugees themselves can take over when volunteers have to leave. Volunteers worked both in a team and on an individual basis and initiated many diverse programmes from sporting activities to bicycle repair workshops to carpet weaving. Every week all volunteers met together with representatives from MOST to report on the work done and present proposals for the future. These meetings also served as a forum for discussing problems that had arisen, not least of which was the lack of motivation which can be so pervasive in refugee camps. This form of voluntary service has proved very valuable both for the refugees and the volunteers as it allows the time needed for each group to get to know each other, something which has been found to be much more difficult in a workcamp situation.

## A one year report from two long-term volunteers

If you read earlier reports from other volunteers who have been to Slovenia, then you know that there are about 30,000 refugees from Bosnia here, mostly Muslims "by nationality". Last year there were 70,000, but a lot of them left for other places in the world in the hope of finding a better life there. At the moment there are three centres in Lubiana where SCI volunteers have been working for up to 12 months at a time with refugees.

Roska has approximately 1,000 people, Vix has 500, and Smartinska has 400 refugees. Other refugees live privately or with relatives. Generally they have to share a room with other families, which means that they don't have much privacy. They are registered as temporary refugees, which mainly means that they are not eligible to work or to get social support. They are depending on the help they get from the government, which means only food and a roof above their heads. On the 5th of January five new volunteers arrived in Lubiana to join the three already there. None of us knew what to expect from the project or what exactly was expected from us. The first few weeks we followed the old volunteers as they introduced us to the different centres, feeling very confused. We remember sitting in the dining room of one centre, with children coming up to us and trying to communicate with us in a language we didn't understand. Also a father, who with a few words of English and German and a lot of gesticulation, told us how his hair turned grey in a few months since his arrival, although he looked at least 45, we learnt that he was only 30. Luckily, there were a few teenagers who could speak some English, and who welcomed us into their youth club, in the beginning they were our main contacts. It was a relief to return back to our flat in the evening and discuss the day's impressions and to talk about what work we hoped to do in the centre. This flat didn't remain a place where only volunteers met, once we got to know people, it became a place where people could come out of the centre and spend an evening drinking "Turkish Kava" or sampling Belgian or English cuisine! A lot of people criticise us for living privately and not in the centre, but this private space is not only necessary for us, but is also beneficial for the refugees. One Bosnian man once said, "when I enter



this flat, I forget that I'm in Lubiana, that I'm in Slovenia, otherwise I'm somewhere and nowhere". All the work we have done has been the result of our own inspiration and creativity. Some ideas came very spontaneously, such as the idea to start a weekly game of Bingo in order to involve both children and adults in an entertaining activity. In order to do this we had to find presents as prizes, and our request to local factories were met with a very positive response. We will never forget how, once we had the idea to collect posters in order to brighten up the centres, we suddenly had 2,000 film promotion posters, courtesy of the Slovenian cinema chain, which we then had to carry to the different centres every day!

If you go to the centres today, you can still see a large mural of Mostar painted by two of us one very cold weekend in February, balanced on old wardrobes and planks. We also managed to divide communal rooms, in order to create a space for a kindergarten and youth-volunteer room. Other paintings can also be found in the communal rooms, kindergartens, and doctor's waiting rooms in two centres. When Spring comes, we will start again to organise outings as we did last year. We try to go with a group of teenagers to a hill just outside Lubiana where we can walk, talk, and play cards, away from all the problems of their everyday life. We also take the children to the park where they

can play in the fresh air in the playground and give their mothers a rest for a few hours. Another project which took a lot of time, but on the other hand gave us the possibility to discover the centres outside Lubiana as well as the countryside of Slovenia, was collecting peace letters, poems, and paintings from refugees, in order to use them for different anti-war exhibitions and publications here, and in our own countries. Through these poems, letters, and paintings we got a much better idea of how the war affects them and how difficult their lives as refugees are.

As you can see, there is a lot of variation in the work we do, and structure is sometimes missing. Though volunteers can give various lessons from language to art, a large part of our time is spent visiting people in their rooms, people with whom we would otherwise have no contact as they don't join communal activities. This work becomes more important as we improve our knowledge of the language and gain their trust. It helps them to know that someone outside of their community cares about their situation.

It's not so easy to describe on paper how much we get involved in their culture, their way of life, and the situation they are now in and how much influence it has on our own lives. We hope that we've given you some idea of our work here.

### ***My Farewell to Bosnia***

*The most difficult moment in my life was saying goodbye to my daddy. My daddy took me to Dakovo, when we took our places in the bus. We said goodbye, me and my daddy. It was the first time in my life I had ever seen my daddy cry. My mother was crying the whole way.*

*Even when we arrived in Slovenia, her eyes are seldom dry. I hope that one of these days I'll be able to go home. Maybe there is no home there anymore. But there for sure is my daddy and my country Bosnia.*

**Sinisa Bakovic**  
**Grade 4, 10 years**



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