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Humanitarian Tradition put to Test

In 1985 the Refugee question has become the most discussed internal political problem – although the number of refugees living in Switzerland is less than 1% of the population. Danielle Benaoun, free-lance journalist, shows the background of this evolution.

A colossal black man sits in the bathtub and devours a sandwich in the shape of Switzerland: – Theme of the carnival of Fribourg 1984 – «not negatively meant against the refugees and the blacks» was commented on by the Clique about their «joke». They had placed a black man in the tub «because he symbolised the foreigner better. With that we want to say that there are too many foreigners who do not adapt to our customs.» The Bath-Tub: Symbol of a boat, which many Swiss again maintain that it is too full.

In 1985 there were about 32,000 refugees, who were admitted into Switzerland and 25,000 people whose application for asylum is still not yet answered. Together their number counts as less than 1% of the resident population.

Overrunned by Petitions

Nevertheless, since a few months, the presence of the refugees stirred up feelings and tempers ran high. Almost daily this furnished headlines and Politicians and authorities on all levels felt bound to hold special meetings and to take measures.

The reasons are many-layered: at the end of the '70's, a development set in with which no one had reckoned seriously. Until 1981 Switzerland took Indo-Chinese refugees on a large scale, mostly in groups. The integration of the Boat People is not unproblematical, but their Fate caused sympathy among the population. In 1982 however, 5,100 people re-

quested for asylum, almost double as much as the year before. In 1984 the number of the asylum petitioners rose to 7,500. seven times as many as in 1979. And in 1985 there were even 10,000 who hope to find a new homeland in Switzerland.

The asylum applicants are distributed almost solely in 6 cantons: Basel-City, Berne, Geneva, Zurich, Fribourg and Vaud. The latter are obliged by the law of asylum, to grant them lodging and welfare services and to inquire from them at first hand about the reason of their flight. Whether an asylum-applicant would be recognised as a refugee is decided in the first instance by the Federal Office for Police Matters (FOP) and finally by the Federal Department of Justice and Police (FDJP). The cantons are overcharged with having to make available, within a very short time, hundreds of lodgings and the Welfare offices and the Foreign police have to raise more personnel. But even the Federation is swept over by the wave of petitions: The pile of 600 pending applications from the year 1980 has increased in 1985 to a mountain of 25,000 pending asylum applications.

In August 1985 the FDJP, under the leadership of Federal Councillor Elisabeth Kopp, recommended, for the most part of the petitions pending for several years, to grant asylum globally. This suggestion, which in a bold stroke of administration would have considerably removed this pending heap, failed because of an almost

unanimous «No» from the German Swiss cantons. Different treatment of old and new applications, conflicts with the law for foreigners, and the luring effect for new economic refugees create the arguments for the answer.

From the Third World too...

The catch-word «Economic Refugee» points to the qualitative aspects of the refugee problem in Switzerland. The asylum-applicants of the last years have broken through the traditional conception of a politically persecuted refugee:

The majority of the asylum applicants do not come anymore from the Eastern block: in 1985 four-fifths came from Turkey or from the Third World (the Tamils from Sri Lanka being in the lead, followed by the Zairians).

The new refugees have roots in cultures which are foreign to the Swiss. Different to the Eastern Block refugees, they hardly belong to the intellectual middle or upper classes, but to the poor and the poorest of this world. Their arrival in Switzerland confronts them with a highly technological society. To feel at home in this society is more difficult and takes longer than was the case with the East European refugees in the past. Besides that, the prohibition to work for the asylum-seekers, that was ordered by 14 cantons in 1985, further delayed their economic independence.

At the same time, in the Switzerland of the '80's, large groups of the population have become uncertain and look sceptically towards the future. The rate of unemployment has risen, although in a world-wide comparison it is extremely low. Change of structure in economics has shoved those to the brink, who could not or were not able any longer to keep pace with the development. In the search for work and lodgings, the Swiss and the foreigners

bump against each other. This intensifies the tendency to make all foreigners – especially the asylum-seekers because of their unfamiliar appearance and conduct – responsible for the harsh unfriendly climate in the country. In urban districts with a high quota of foreigners, social tensions are felt in everyday life.

Winnings for the National Campaign

The National Campaign for People and Homeland (NA) again resumed its hostile, antagonistic policy towards foreigners from



Tamils in a Reception camp in Berne. (Photo: Michael von Graffenried)

the '60s and gained new stimulus: In October 1985 its French Swiss counterpart, «Vigilance», during the election of Parliament in Geneva, surprisingly became the strongest party. Similarly, a few weeks later the same thing happened in Lausanne. The success of the national Rightists has a signal effect. The Asylum problem obtains first priority for the government parties. For a pragmatic solution however there is already a dead-end in sight:

The Confederation could not cope with the high numbers of asylum applications. The necessity to increase the personnel is recognised too late. The Parliament granted additional posts only in the last two years.

The co-operation between the Fe-

deration and the Cantons proved to be increasingly more difficult. The cantons begin to follow their own asylum politics, Fribourg for instance does not accept any more new asylum petitions since 1st December 1985.

A unified conclusion has been reached by all the government parties; at a hasty speed special measures are arranged and the asylum law is being intensified: In September 1985, a delegate on behalf of the refugees as co-ordinator between the Confederation and the Cantons was appointed. In December, the Federal Council

put into force a change of the asylum decree. It expanded the legal handle for rejection of «obviously unfounded asylum petitions».

In Spring 1986, the second revision of the asylum law (the first revision dates back only two years ago) should go to the Parliament. The main-points of this bill are the omission of the second enquiry of the asylum petitioner by the FOP, a 30-days' arrest prior to deportation for rejected asylum-seekers and the right of emergency for the Federal Council, in case of a massive rise in the number of asylum-applicants to set the law partly out of effect.

Aim of this revision:

The cantons should get more

power for decisions. Unauthorised asylum-seekers should be able to be recognised and deported faster. More and more, refugees should be discouraged. What was meant as an appeasement of hostile atmosphere towards foreigners in the country, has, however, already called forth new criticism for the plan: The Relief Organisations, who work traditionally for Refugees, fear a rise in deportation and thereby an infringement of the law of nations, the principal of «non-refoulement».

The Church gives a new topicality to the church-asylum that was often accorded in the Middle Ages. In 1985 several church communities granted rejected asylum-seekers, who were threatened by deportation to their home-land, protection.

In only 10 days in 1985, 20,000 Swiss signed an open letter to Federal Councillor Elisabeth Kopp, in which they demand a humane asylum politics.

What else?

It is to be foreseen that the asylum question will provide new political dynamite, the more so as Swiss development runs similar to most of the West European countries. The urgently needed European co-operation has only just commenced. At present the countries are inclined to push refugees mutually across the borders.

At a meeting of seven West European government representatives at the end of November 1985 in Stockholm the retiring UNO High Commissioner for Refugees, Dr. Paul Hartling censured this European intimidating practice and showed up the world-wide relativity: 97 per cent of the refugees of the world find refuge in the Third World Countries. In 1985 about 100,000 reached Europe. Sudan, one of the poorest countries of the world, alone takes so many refugees each month. ●