

Kraljevo Spurns Refugees

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Kraljevo residents are threatening to forcibly evict thousands of Kosovo Serb refugees who they say are putting an impossible burden on the local economy

"No entry to Kosovo Serbs" reads the sign on the door of a popular Kraljevo cafe. It reflects the volatile mood currently hanging over the southern Serbian town where resentment towards Kosovo refugees is rapidly reaching boiling point.

Around 25,000 refugees poured into Kraljevo in the wake of the Serbian army retreat from Kosovo last summer. But the town's 60,000-strong population -- depressed by economic conditions, which have grown steadily worse over the past 10 years -- sees the dispossessed Serbs as a crippling burden.

Already, there have been outbreaks of violence. Last month, an armed mob attacked an Audi with a Kosovo licence plate, loosing off a volley of pistol shots before completely demolishing the car. The vehicle's four occupants were later treated for serious injuries at the Kraljevo Health Clinic.

Meanwhile, in nearby Lazac, villagers staged angry protests when the authorities attempted to house 40 Kosovo refugees in the local cultural centre. And residents of Vitanovac have refused outright to connect refugee accommodation to the water supply, arguing that there would not be enough left for their own needs.

Since last September, people in Kraljevo and the surrounding region have been threatening to forcibly evict refugees from municipal buildings. Police were forced to intervene when locals sabotaged building projects aimed at providing emergency shelters.

Open conflict was averted last year when the authorities relocated thousands of Kosovars from school buildings to community centres and disused cowsheds. But locals in Mataruska Banja have since threatened to reclaim premises by force.

Mataruska residents say the once popular tourist resort has become a virtual ghost-town since the refugees arrived. One hotelier, Vladan Stojkovic, told IWPR, "People are keeping their distance because of the rude and dirty refugees. There aren't any factories or big firms here where people can earn a living. There is only tourism -- but now we don't even have that."

Stojkovic went on to say, "That's why we decided to take the law into our own hands. Blood will be shed, I'm telling you, if these people don't get out of Banja soon."

Kraljevo businessmen echoed the hotelier's resentment. One café owner commented, "Everything has changed since the Kosovars arrived. They're rude and arrogant. I've started losing my regular customers."

Particularly galling for most locals is the fact that some refugees appear to be comparatively well off. A few are even thought to have taken part in attacks on Albanian homes in Kosovo, bringing their spoils away with them.

Zvonko Obradovic, chairman of the executive committee of the Kraljevo Town Assembly, summed up the

local mood, "The people here are in a really difficult position. Refugees who were government officials in Kosovo still get their salaries paid, even though they're unable to work. And they have a range of other benefits that the local population can't hope to enjoy. We're finding it more and more difficult to control the tensions that threaten to erupt into open conflict at the slightest provocation."

Residents claim the refugees often get preferential treatment - particularly over the fierce competition for stalls in Kraljevo's market place.

Around 3,000 factory workers, currently on unpaid leave from Kraljevo's ailing industries, make a living by selling goods at the market. This year, however, around 40 per cent of the prime pitches were allotted to Kosovars and the displaced stall-holders say they have been deprived of any source of income.

The situation in Kraljevo's schools has provoked widespread outcry. Around 1,300 refugee children have been placed in schools across the region, swelling classes by nearly 25 per cent.

Savo Veljkovic, headmaster of the Jovo Kursula primary school, said, "Hardly a day goes by without the refugee children breaking something. But the most disheartening thing is that they readily admit their vandalism and hand over money to pay for the damage. They treat school property as if it belongs to the enemy."

Kraljevo residents also complain that the refugees put enormous strain on local facilities. Visits to the town's health clinic have increased by 20 per cent while water consumption has soared by 25 per cent. Rados Trnavac, manager at the Vodovod water company, claims that supplies will be exhausted by mid-summer if the trend continues.

The refugees themselves remain defiant. A teacher from a secondary school in Pec, who now lives in a part of Kraljevo dubbed "Little Albania", says, "I feel intolerance and hostility at every turn. The locals look at us as if we were second-class citizens. We lived peacefully with the Albanians until the Serbian police arrived."

He went on to say that he had taken no part in the Serbian terror campaign in Kosovo. "Thousands of Albanians were killed and the paramilitaries piled their spoils on to trucks and fled for Serbia. Because of that, I had just two hours to leave the home, which my father and grandfather had built. And now you're asking me about a smashed window or a broken nose! It was you [the Serbs] who brought us here, so now you'll just have to put up with us."

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