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Interview – Swiss asylum policy

From asylum to immigration law



Urs Scheidegger, new director of the Federal Office for Refugees.

In 1991, Switzerland received 42,000 requests for political asylum. In 1992 the figure was down to 18,000, but it will probably be back to the 25,000 mark by the end of 1993. In addition, Switzerland has granted temporary refuge to 5,000 victims of the war in ex-Yugoslavia since July 1992. The biggest group of asylum-seekers in the first half of this year were also from ex-Yugoslavia (45%), followed by Somalis, Tamils, Albanians and Turks. The last-named present special problems to asylum officials since "Turks" include Kurds whose freedom of expression in Turkey is restricted.

The asylum problem is obviously an international one. Large numbers of refugees are streaming towards western Europe from the southern hemisphere and from eastern Europe in search of safety and employment. They appeal to the laws of asylum and hope to find refuge in a country where life is better than where they come from. In Switzerland too, such refugees ask for political asylum.

Urs Scheidegger, formerly MP for Soleure (FDP) and now head of the Federal Office for Refugees, talks to Swiss Review about asylum policy.

Swiss Review: Mr. Scheidegger, what are the main difficulties in setting political asylum policy today?

Urs Scheidegger: With the dramatic rise in asylum-seekers in the mid-1980s, it became clear that ever more foreigners looking for work were trying to migrate to western Europe by using political asylum. The proportion of foreigners seeking asylum status on genuine political grounds dropped. Our asylum law, aimed at giving a safe haven to the persecuted, is increasingly being turned into an immigration law. And in view of this new state of affairs the whole problem of immigration needs to be reconsidered. Parliament is also of this opinion, since it has recently passed a motion requiring integrated immigration policies and a new immigration law.

In the first half of 1993 the number of requests for asylum rose a little, but compared with the record seen in 1991 the situation is well under control. This is partly due to the fact that the number of asylum decisions made now exceeds requests.

The civil war in ex-Yugoslavia remains the central problem for asylum policy. Today, we have absolutely no idea how many victims of this war will have to be taken in by west European countries in the end.

How can Switzerland come to grips with the asylum problem in the future?

Unfortunately, there are no miracle solutions in the field of asylum and immigration. But pragmatic day-to-day decision-making is not enough. In Switzerland we are in a fortunate position: a revision of the asylum law is at present taking place, and we are also on course for immigration legislation. But these two elements will have to be supplemented by foreign policy decisions on refugee matters. These must include

coordination with other European states and measures in countries of origin targeted at minimising migratory streams.

Mention should also be made of the difficult financial situation here at home at all levels of government. General financial constraints also apply to refugee policy.

And one last thing. A French socialist parliamentarian recently said – quite rightly – that his country was too small to deal with the misery of the whole world. And that is also true for Switzerland, although there must always be a place here for genuine asylum-seekers.

Interview: Giuseppe Rusconi



Every country is "too small to deal with the misery of the whole world". Our picture: Refugees from ex-Yugoslavia. (Photos: RDZ)