

KOSOVAN REFUGEES

The information in this article is for teachers and others interested in the background to the refugee situation in the Balkans. The images can be downloaded from this file. Suggestions for questions for pupils are included with the images in this article, other ideas for their classroom use in either geography or citizenship at secondary level can be found at the accompanying article.

Understanding and knowledge of the differences between places, the diversity of cultures, and the dynamic functioning of economies and societies is a central part of a geographical education, which in turn underpins sensitivity and tolerance. In a world increasingly characterised by social inequality, fragmented lives, great mobility and rapid communications this contribution by geography to good world citizenship is essential.

Refugees are people who have been forced to leave their homes for a number of reasons:

- Due to wars, often civil war

- Due to environmental disasters such as floods, earthquakes and famine

- For fear of persecution due to race, religion or politics.

Background information for the Balkan region

Much of the 1990s was dominated by events happening in the Balkans. In 1995 the RGS-IBG produced a Geographical Intelligence Paper outlining the geography behind these events. This section is taken from that paper which was about the whole Balkan area. The section concentrates on the Kosovo region because the Society has also obtained a series of images taken in Albania through the 1990s.

The power of the geographical approach is its ability to integrate social, environmental, political, cultural, historical and economic factors within a spatial framework to make sense of a bewildering chain of events. The Balkans is one of the most complex areas of Europe, if not the world, in terms of its ethnic, linguistic and religious composition. Three of the regions people claim descent from classical times, including the Albanians who claim descent from the Illyrians. Others, most notably the Slav groups have migrated into the area.

Some of these groups have been separated from their main ethnic group by international boundaries, but actually live in a contiguous area, such as the Albanians who live in Kosovo, Macedonia and Montenegro.



To further complicate matters no one ethnic group may be the majority in a given area and groups may be intermixed at regional or even local level. These patterns are dynamic and are not easily incorporated into treaties and land divisions. The dismantling of the former communist state of Yugoslavia during the 1990s resulted in the 'balkanization' of the region into smaller states.

Yugoslavia's two non-Slav groups, the Albanians in Kosovo and the Hungarians in Vojvodina, could not be given republican status but were considered 'autonomous regions' within the Republic of Serbia. Earlier constitutional changes had meant that these regions had substantial autonomy and Serbs saw themselves as losing control over large areas. Albania was seen as wanting to incorporate Kosovo into a 'Greater Albania' and Serbs felt they were persecuted in the region.

Kosovo has little economic wealth. The land is good agriculturally but is one of the poorest regions of the Balkans. It is the Serb view that Kosovo represents the heartland of the original Serbia nation as Medieval Serbian settlement was concentrated here. Serbs view the Albanians as late comers to the region in the later Medieval times and the agents of the Turks who drove the Serbs from the area.

Against this the Albanians claim a stronger heritage from their ethnic descent from the

original Illyrians who occupied the area in Classical times.

With the gradual breakup of the former Yugoslavia and the conflicts which arose, even more pressure was put on the area. The fall of communism in Albania opened borders and there was more and more pressure to force the Albanian Kosovans from their land.

The results in the 1990s



Following the fall of communism in the early 1990s the infrastructure of Albania was in a state of decay. This had been a tractor factory producing equipment for the agricultural sector and providing manufacturing employment. By 1992 it has deteriorated, along with much of the other infrastructure and industry.

If you or your parents had been working in this factory what would its deterioration mean to your standard of living and lifestyle?



The ferry is in the straights between Albania and Corfu in summer 1996. This teenage boy jumped ship intending to swim to Corfu and a 'new life'. Under Maritime Law the Captain of the ship has to rescue anyone who 'goes overboard' and therefore had to return to pick up the passenger.

Why did the boy jump overboard? Was he going for a swim? Was he pushed or did he fall in? Or was he trying to get to Corfu? Why would he want to get there?

Kosovan refugees in Kukes, northern Albania



Tractor camp at Kukes 1999. Families forced from their homes travelled from Kosovo on their tractors, their only means of transport. They had to bring everything they might need with them. Enterprising families even brought the kitchen stove and were able to provide themselves with hot food. The season is late winter early spring, and whilst the days would be warm the temperature at night was below freezing. People had brought money to buy stores but they were often robbed by Serb paramilitary. The local population of Kukes were willing to offer accommodation to the Kosovans - at a price. 600 dm (about £400 per week)

Why do you think the people had tractors? What would you take if you had to flee your home? Why do you think having hot food was important?

This Ferris wheel in the picture below in Kukes was providing a different sort of amusement for the Kosovan refugees in 1999. The teenagers seen here are mostly male as the girls would be at back in camp helping with the household chores.



UN Refugee camps run by the Italians April 1999

Newly arrived refugees in the foreground of the image waiting to be allocated a place in the camp.



How have they travelled? What have they brought with them? What are the ages of the people in the image? Does the camp look inviting?



The boy had been injured during his flight from Kosovo across the Albanian border. On arrival at the camp he went for medical treatment. Despite his wounds he seems happy to have arrived.



Italian refugee camp number 1, refugees cooking breakfast. Families were not always able to flee together and brought with them what they could. If you had to leave your home at very short notice what sort of items would you bring with you? Remember you only have a limited space to carry things.



Refugee camp between Morini and Kukes. The helicopter is taking people from the camp for emergency medical treatment in Tirana, Albania's capital.

What do the faces of the people tell you about their feelings? What are their ages?



For this old man in his 90's, after days on the road, a shave is one of the first things he relishes.

What would be your first 'luxury'?

Other refugee camps in Kukes



Refugees at a camp run by the Greek contingent in Kukes. The lorry contains water and people are bringing any receptacle they can for their supplies.

What do you use water for? What would it be like to live without water on tap all day, every day

for weeks and weeks?



Some people did not find placements in camps run by the UNHCR but ended up in a disused theatre in Kukes.



When tents ran out in May 1999 families were given makeshift homes made out of sheets of plastic, in which they lived for up to several months.

How would you like to live in a space this small for several months with all your family and belongings? What would you miss most?



The image shows lorries in the background, supplied by the Red Cross and the Red Crescent, used for carrying equipment and food. The people are queuing for rations.

Would you be prepared to queue if you or your family were hungry? What would be the alternative?

The situation changes

By May 1999 the UN were worried about the possible shelling of the Kukes refugee camps by Serbian forces and began to evacuate the Kosovans further south. They were reluctant to leave as they wanted to be near to the border in order to return to their homes as soon as it became possible to do so.



Would you wish to remain near to your home or move away to safety? Why might you wish to remain near to the home in which your families have lived for many hundreds of years? Would you be prepared to leave with only a few belongings in a bundle? These people have been told that the situation is now so dangerous that they must be transported by a Dutch Nato plane to an area further south in Albania.



How might you feel if you had to move again? What would you take with you?

Overnight the tractor and tent camp is broken up.



How would you feel when you woke up to find that all the other tents around you have been dismantled and you are waiting to find out where you are going to be sent?



June 1999

Some Kosovans decided to go back to their former homes. The situation was still dangerous but the NATO troops were present and able to deal with problems as they arose. This place is Kachnik in Kosovo.

What do the houses look like? How would you feel if this was your home? What might you do next?

TEACHING SUGGESTION FOR USE WITH THE KOSOVAN REFUGEE IMAGES.

Useful websites

<http://www.geographyinthenews@rgs.org>
www.guardian.co.uk/refugees
www.unhcr.org
www.refugeecouncil.org.uk
www.worldaware.org.uk

Useful sources

Refugees, Jull Rutter; The Refugee Council. Available from Worldaware. £7.50

1. Whilst this is aimed a primary school pupils many of the exercises could be adapted to use with secondary pupils, especially the activity 'A refugee because I am different'.
2. Refugees, we left because we had to, The Refugee Council. Available from Worldaware. £7.50

Suggested activities

1. Use the images of people moving to the tractor camps to ask the question, either singly or in 'family groups', 'You have 30 minutes to leave your home, what would you take with you?' Then compare the pupils' lists with the possessions visible in the photographs.
2. Give copies of a section of the images to groups of pupils and ask them to think about what the images have to do with them on a variety of scales e.g. as individuals, to their local community, to this country, to Europe and globally.

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