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Desperate Parents Airlift 2,000 Children, Ages 7 to 16, to Escape War-Ravaged Sri Lanka

Mathur, Rakesh Mr. Klaus Severin, Chief of Border Police at Frankfurt Airport, introduced me to four Sri Lankan children who had just arrived from Moscow on the Russian national carrier, Aeroflot. Ages 6 to 14, the children were well dressed, tired and, except for the oldest who was crying, generally composed. Severin told me that the first thing they do after receiving these children is to comfort them with the help of a resident Tamil-speaking Sri Lankan social worker. Each of them told her the same story: "The Indian army is torturing our families in Sri Lanka, that's why our parents have sent us across to our relatives in Europe." They also said they had thrown away all their travel documents and passports, which the interpreter told me was the first group she knew who had done so. But, like all the 2,142 Sri Lanka children before them, each had telephone numbers of some relatives in Germany.

Severin explained that these children were probably sent by an organized group from Sri Lanka to India, then via Moscow to the ultimate destination of Frankfurt. Airline regulations and Sri Lanka law make it nearly impossible for children to fly unaccompanied from Sri Lanka to West Germany. But the route through Moscow avoids both laws and regulations. The parents pay an unknown group about US $2,100 per child - more than three times the cost of air fare.

The Sri Lankans are taking advantage of a soon-to-be-closed loophole in Germany's immigration laws which allows persons under 18 to enter the country without visas. Those over 16 can apply for political asylum, as have thousands of adult refugees. And like the adults, they have little chance of ever being granted permanent status. But the children under 16 have a different future in store. A recent German judicial ruling declared that they should not be treated as "refugees" but as human beings to be given excellent education and upbringing. Unless there are blood relatives to care for the children, the state takes full responsibility and attempts to place them in foster homes.

The so-called relatives of these children in West Germany are thoroughly investigated. Unless German residents can prove that they are the nearest blood relations, the children are not handed over. Instead, they are sent to special state-run homes. There have been over 150 cases of children getting kidnapped from these homes, apparently by Tamils. Recently on the borders of France and Denmark, several Sri Lanka Tamils were arrested while taking some of the abducted children to these countries, possibly to join relatives. Without visas, the children could not leave Germany legally.

Since autumn, 1988, the number of child refugees arriving at Frankfurt Airport from Sri Lanka has increased dramatically. By the end of September, the number had reached 1,900. All of them alleged that they were tortured by the Indian soldiers in their villages. But medical examinations have not traced any sign of physical attack on their bodies. The children do not seem to be poor compared to other children coming from Eastern Turkey or Afghanistan. They come in Adidas shoes and very good clothes. They have excellent eating manners and habits. The German diet of sausage and French fries does not seem foreign to them.

Airport Children Shelter Criticized

Both the Federal Border Police and the youth welfare office have been heavily attacked from different sides over the past few months with regard to the initial care of the children. The FBP has been accused of "deprivation of liberty" after it locked the waiting room door in the transit area because some refugees disappeared.

Peter Holum of the FBP reported that questioning of the children was conducted as nicely as possible. In spite of important tracing and search operations, the children are driven to the temporary residential homes of the local welfare organization as soon as one of the youth welfare cars is full. On an average the whole procedure takes three hours.

According to the head of the youth welfare office, Mattluas Mann, the six qualified employees of the office look after the children day and night, including weekends. He does not accept the accusations which are made by politicians and even by organizations for the protection of children. "We are only acting in the children's

interests. Of course there are problems because we do not have resources. No one can expect us to look after the children individually because of staff shortages." The office's deputy said, "We can only make sure that matters of bureaucracy are dealt with as quickly as possible and that children are accommodated as suitably as possible."

The Foster Home Programs

Eighty percent of the arriving Sri Lanka Tamil children are placed with relatives in Germany within three or four days. A total of 700 have been placed in foster homes. According to Severin, children under 16 are not handed over to any religious organization, contrary to some western news reports. They remain under the government's constant supervision. In fact, the Germans make sure that Hindus remain Hindus. Not even their names are changed. This sensitivity is a result of highly criticized treatment of Jewish children under the Nazis. The objective is to place the children with German foster parents who may be either Christians or atheists but whose first need is to adopt a child, or they are placed in boarding schools. But in reality, there is a severe shortage of suitable places. According to Mann, the office has (in mid-October) temporary custody of more than 450 children.

Young people over 16 who have applied for political asylum may be taking the help of Christian churches. It is unfortunate that the Hindu organizations in Germany have reportedly turned a blind eye on the situation. The local VHP chapter said they were not even aware of the entry of the children into Germany, despite extensive national and international publicity the children have received. However, Frankfurt's Sikh Gurudwara, established in 1978, has a free feeding program every Sunday and some facilities for the homeless.

Germany, the Reluctant Host

The West German state of Hesse, of which Frankfurt is the capital, spent more than $40,000,000 on refugee children by the end of 1988. Last year, most of the children came from Iran, but the influx from Iran has stopped and now it is the turn of Sri Lanka. Last month, only one child came from India while 68 came from Sri Lanka. The various regions of Germany are reluctant to take more children - they

would like to pass them on to others. They claim that they do not have a suitable infrastructure. Opinions have been expressed that so much taxpayer's money should not be spent on outside citizens.

"The solution, however, seems to be a fairly easy one for the government," a social worker from a German Christian church told me. "Until now, children under the age of 16 did not require a visa. This allowance will be abolished. The consequence: the airlines can no longer transport children who do not have a visa or do not stand a chance of getting one."

Just such a law will be decided upon in April. Then only children under the age of 16 who are members of the European Economic Community countries plus Yugoslavia, Morocco, Turkey and Tunisia will be excluded from the visa requirements.

Aside from the cost, politicians belonging to the government coalition say it is awful for the little ones to be exposed to such a cultural shock. The head of the liberal party said, "Is it human for a family to put its child into an airplane in the East and leave it to its fate in West Germany?" Such answers worry the refugee organizations. Said one representative, Marita, "Should Jewish parents have taken their children to the concentration camps or into the gas chambers just to spare them the culture shock in a strange country?"

Marita understands the problem first hand. She has adopted a refugee herself - a girl, Feven (not a Sri Lankan). Feven was 6 years old then, now she is ten. She cannot remember how she got on the plane. Marita remembers the chaotic first six months when the girl had fits of fear; "Mum and dad gone, the police with the big car, fire, even road works." Slowly, though, Feven has become calmer and happy. But Marita has faced the intolerant reactions of neighbors - Swastika graffiti on her house, a scratched car and so on. "In our family," Marita said, "we experienced the problems caused by uprooting and war, and we see very clearly that 'refugee' meant 'rescue.'"

"Pro Asye," the federal working party for refugees, reckons that the main point of the new law is money. And indeed, the then Home Secretary, F. Zimmermann, quoted the high cost in support of the decision for the new law. At this point, there

is little likelihood of the law's not going into effect and ending the flow of child refugees from disturbed countries.

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