

11:00 27 Sep FEATURE-No comfort for Serb refugees in Chile

By Tiffany Woods

SANTIAGO (Reuters) - Dusko Ugarak knew he made a mistake in coming to Chile the first day he stepped off the plane.

"On the first day, when I saw everything, I said, 'We can't make it here,'" the 22-year-old hairstylist said.

Ugarak arrived on June 16 with 25 other people who identify themselves as Serbs because of their orthodox beliefs but who were born in Bosnia and Croatia. The group had accepted a tantalizing offer from the Geneva-based U.N. High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) to escape the turbulence of the Balkans by moving to Chile as part of a pilot program.

They thought their years of suffering were over. They had fled to Serbia during the Bosnian war only to find themselves in the midst of NATO's bombing campaign in Yugoslavia, but now they had the promise of a new and stable life in Chile.

Today, with few jobs, little money and even less hope, they regret the decision. Even the U.N. agency that brought them to Chile seems to admit it may not be the promised land they had imagined. The UNHCR's job is to "remove (refugees) from hell but not to take them into paradise," said Guilherme da Cunha, UNHCR representative for South America's Mercosur trade union.

FALSE PROMISES?

The refugees claim U.N. officials painted a false picture of Chile, which is considered an emerging market.

"I believed UNHCR. They said that (Chile) was better, that it is good. They said it is a country with a high level of development," Zoran Markovic, 26, said in broken Spanish.

He and the others soon found that Chile's economy is still reeling from its first recession in nearly 20 years and that unemployment has hit its highest level this decade. In the May-July period, 11.1 percent of the work force -- or 642,730 people -- was unemployed.

They also learned that, with a minimum monthly salary of about \$190, wages are below expectations. Most said the best job offers they have received pay \$285 per month.

The refugees are reluctant to accept low-paying jobs, fearing that that may mean the end of the UNHCR's help, which trickles off as they get on their feet. "If you have a (work) contract, afterward they (the UNHCR) forget you. If I ask for help, the second time it is not possible," Ugarak said.

Of the group, only three people have accepted jobs, which pay between about \$380 and \$725 a month.

The 26 refugees live in a red brick dormitory-style house managed by a Catholic Church agency in a low- to middle-class neighborhood in Santiago. Each family has its own small bedroom and the bathroom down the hall is shared. They originally had to wash clothes by hand but now share one washing machine.

Babies have no diapers and the refugees do not drink milk because of the tight budget, Ugarak said. The money the refugee program gives to the cook to buy food is not enough, so she spends her own money as well, he said. The UNHCR gives a family of four about \$60 a month to buy items like toiletries and cigarettes, the refugees said.

Their days are the same. They spend them sitting at a wooden table in the open-air, red-tiled patio discussing their problems. Like elderly people in a rest home, meal times dictate their schedules. Only a few take advantage of the free Spanish classes. They say they cannot concentrate.

While sympathizing with the refugees, the UNHCR's da Cunha said it has done all that it can.

"I told them that being a refugee is cruel," he said, adding that his agency will not relocate them in other countries. "We cannot put everyone in developed countries."

Those are harsh words for the Serbs, some of whom led comfortable lives back home. Ugarak said he had his own car and came from a family that had three houses and an apartment.

DESPITE PROBLEMS, MORE RELOCATIONS PLANNED

The refugees were supposed to be living on their own after three months, but the UNHCR has given them more time to stay at the dormitory while they look for work.

In the meantime, Chile's government wishes this would all end. The country, known for the thousands of Chileans who fled Augusto Pinochet's 1973-1990 dictatorship, thought it would open its doors to refugees as a symbolic gesture of goodwill, said Jaime Moreno, head of migration at the Interior Ministry.

"We really lament this," Moreno said. "We did not want anybody to be deceived, and that is exactly what happened. This is very uncomfortable."

The future of the pilot program is unclear. While Moreno said the refugees' problems have forced the program to be frozen, da Cunha said his agency plans to bring more refugees to Chile.

Sixty-four refugees were originally supposed to come, but Moreno said it appears that the other 38 changed their minds when they discovered Chile's true reality.

Despite the cool reception in Chile, the UNHCR plans to implement similar programs in Brazil and Argentina for refugees from Africa and the former Yugoslavia, da Cunha said.

But with Argentina in its worst recession in a decade and Brazil's unemployment in the first half of 1999 at its highest since polling began in 1983, refugees there may be doomed to repeat Chile's experience.

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