

Irish: The Great Emigrants

But not so keen on receiving outsiders

by Kevin Rafter

Resentment is growing in Ireland against foreigners seeking asylum here.

The antagonism has become so public that Irish President Mary Robinson has warned of the danger of racism "rearing its ugly head" unless people learn to deal with the issues surrounding refugees and immigration.

The number of asylum-seekers in Ireland has grown from 39 in 1992 to 1,179 last year. Ireland, which has for the last two centuries exported its own people to the four corners of the globe, is now the destination for refugees from the Third World and Eastern Europe. It's said that not since the Celts were driven westward by the Romans has Ireland seen such a large influx of refugees.

Ironically, statistics from the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development show that among all the Western European countries, Ireland actually has the lowest proportion of foreigners in its population. In 1992, just 2.7 percent of the Irish population were non-citizens. This

compared with 3.5 percent in Britain, 6.3 percent in France, and 8.5 percent in Germany.

Why has Ireland attracted so many refugees? Many have found it an easier place to gain entry following a recent tightening of immigration procedures in other European countries, such as Britain and Germany.

Many leading European nations also have been experiencing economic difficulties. With little economic growth in places like Germany and France, there are fewer jobs for foreigners.

Ireland's economy, on the other hand, has been booming for five years. With almost non-existent inflation, and nearly 1,000 new jobs being created every week, Ireland has become a magnet for refugees.

The largest number of refugees has been from Romania, followed closely by Congo (formerly Zaire), Somalia, and Algeria. Irish refugee agencies have been ill-prepared for the increase. The ease with which refugees can enter the country has only added to the numbers.

So far, Ireland has resisted introducing restrictive immigration procedures. But the reception refugees are receiving has been far from "100,000 welcomes" for which the Irish are famous.

Many refugees were appalled by the anti-immigrant comments

of several candidates in the recent Irish general election. Several leading politicians warned of "floods" of immigrants coming into Ireland, many of whom were "professional beggars."

This attitude is "both cheap and shallow," says Drazen Nozinic, a Serbo-Croatian from the former Yugoslavia who obtained refugee status four years ago.

A former government minister with responsibility in this area, Joan Burton, says that "Irish people have been taken by surprise by the cultural differences between them and refugees." Partly in response to these attitudes, refugees are now trying to establish an association to represent their interests.

Not all the comments about refugees are bad. Jon Bennet, who runs Dublin's Hill Top Hostel, describes them as the "most polite, appreciative, graceful, and well-mannered people. It's horrifying to hear the things being said about them."

The majority of refugees coming to Ireland are like Mr. Nozinic: they have no place to go home to in safety. He fled the war in the former Yugoslavia after friends were killed and family members were beaten up.

Many countries have fast-tracked procedures for asylum-seekers. In Austria, a decision on an asylum application takes

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only a few hours. In Ireland, it takes on average three years to process each application.

At present, almost 2,000 refugees in Ireland await decisions on their cases. They exist in legal limbo. They live in temporary accommodations and are prohibited from working or pursuing an education.

In an attempt to defuse the debate, President Robinson has appealed to the Irish people to be receptive in their attitudes toward refugees. She drew a parallel between the treatment of refugees in Ireland today and the reception afforded Irish emigrants to North America in

the past. Just as the Irish crossed the Atlantic Ocean in search of their fortunes, many now see Ireland as a haven.

As Sean Love of the Irish section of Amnesty International says, "The least we can do is offer these people a fair hearing and fair treatment." **TSC**