

Confronting Vallorbe's asylum culture shock



The local train station is a welcome refuge for many of Vallorbe's asylum seekers (Keystone)

Two worlds – new asylum seekers and residents - co-exist in mutual isolation in the picturesque town of Vallorbe in the Jura mountains.

The town's asylum centre last weekend opened its doors to the public as part of a series of measures to ease tensions in the local population. Justice Minister Eveline Widmer-Schlumpf was among the visitors.

Vallorbe is home to one of four asylum registration centres in Switzerland, together with Basel, Kreuzlingen and Chiasso. Its 200 asylum seekers represent eight per cent of the local population of 3,200 - significantly more than Basel's 0.3 per cent.

The Vallorbe centre opened in November 2000. Perched high above the small town, it is just a short walk from the main railway station, the traditional meeting point for many of those waiting for news of their applications.

But the presence of large numbers of foreigners - mainly from Africa and the Balkans - at the train station and in town has raised tensions among the locals.

In December 2007 the local town council called for all asylum seekers to be banned from the station. The cantonal government threw out what it termed an "anti-constitutional" proposal, but communal, cantonal and federal authorities have since promised to try and improve the situation.

"Vallorbe has a heavy burden to bear with this centre," said Vallorbe's mayor Laurent Francfort. "There are obvious tensions - real in certain cases and linked to a lack of understanding in others."

Mixed feelings

"There haven't been any serious incidents - one physical attack at the station over the past five years and cases of shoplifting - but it's a sentiment of insecurity among a certain part of the population, mainly the elderly and young women."

"It's definitely real," said retired local resident Raymond Cédric. "You feel the tension every day, although we are starting to get used to the asylum seekers."

Philippe Hengy, director of the Vallorbe asylum centre, refers to the current climate as "a permanent culture shock".

But Esther Graf denied feeling unsafe: "The Africans are a lot more polite than some people I know. I take the train every week and they don't bother me at all," she explained.

Nuslim, a 39-year-old Kurd, said he didn't sense any hostility from locals, but added: "I tried to make contact, but they didn't want to as they knew I was an asylum seeker. They are cold people."

René Gfeller, a volunteer working at the ARAVOH asylum help centre at the station, agreed that there was a sense of insecurity among local people.

"And the pressure has increased in Vallorbe, as new asylum seekers are staying longer in accordance with new asylum law," he explained.

New centralised administrative procedures under the new law, which came into effect on January 1, mean asylum cases take longer to process. Asylum seekers now stay at the centre an average of 32 days instead of ten.

Gfeller, who wants to "build bridges, not walls" between the foreigners and the residents, said that fears are ill founded.

Special measures

But he did admit that many people resented the fact that the asylum seekers appeared to be "hanging around, doing nothing". To try to ease tensions the authorities announced a raft of special measures in March.

The maximum number of asylum seekers at the Vallorbe centre, designed for 276, has now been fixed at 180 and can only be exceeded in an emergency.

From September eight to ten people will be able to take part every day in community service work, such as clearing riverbanks and footpaths. Asylum seekers are currently unable to seek paid work.

And every day 15-30 people will be accompanied on visits to some of Vallorbe's famous tourist sites, like the Vallorbe limestone caves and the Iron and Railway Museum.

The local football pitch, ice skating rink and bowling ground will also be made available and the ARAVOH office is due to move from the station and be transformed into a larger Portakabin facility.

Although there is widespread support for the new proposals, not everyone is happy with the long-term prospects for Vallorbe.

"I don't think we can do much to change things," said Cédric. "The federal authorities imposed the current situation and we are powerless."

At the ARAVOH drop-in centre, fairly oblivious to the storm outside, a group of young Eritreans sip tea over a game of drafts, while their neighbour from Afghanistan finishes a puzzle.

Ziyad Al Mashadanj, a 35-year-old artist from Baghdad, shows Gfeller his sketches of fellow asylum seekers and the local countryside.

"Switzerland is a very beautiful, calm and clean country. The situation in Iraq is so terrible; I really want to stay in Europe. I can't go back to Iraq. If I did, I'd go mad."

swissinfo, Simon Bradley in Vallorbe

NEW ASYLUM LAW

Switzerland faces similar migrant challenges to those of other countries in Europe. In recent years it has received large numbers of asylum seekers, the majority of whom do not qualify for refugee status or residence in Switzerland.

In September 2006 two-thirds of voters backed new laws on immigration and asylum, which the government said were necessary to make Switzerland less attractive and to curb abuses. It was the ninth time since 1984 that Switzerland's asylum law had been amended.

As a result asylum seekers who cannot produce identity papers within 48 hours without a credible reason have been automatically excluded. Rejected asylum seekers are barred from regular welfare benefits and qualify only for food and shelter.

Rejected asylum seekers who refuse to leave the country face detention of up to two years.

Switzerland will again have to adapt its laws on asylum and foreigners following a migration law passed on Wednesday by the European Union parliament.

The EU law limits the period illegal immigrants can be detained to 18 months, six months less than is the case in Switzerland, which has signed a security and asylum accord with the EU due to come into effect in a few months' time.

KEY FACTS

The industrialised countries that lodged the most asylum applications in 2007 were:

The United States: 49,200

Sweden: 36,200

France: 29,900

Canada: 28,300

Britain: 27,900

Greece: 25,110

Germany: 19,160

Italy: 14,050

Austria: 11,880

Belgium: 11,120

Switzerland was in 11th place with 10,390 – 1,561 of which were positive.

Some 16 per cent of asylum-seekers came from war-torn Eritrea, with 1,662 applications. It was followed by Serbia, with 953 requests, Iraq, Turkey and Sri Lanka.

The number of asylum seekers reached an all-time high in 1999 with 48,000 applications. 30,100 from Serbia and Kosovo.

In 2004, when government assistance to asylum seekers was stopped, the number fell to 14,250 or nearly 7,000 fewer than the previous year.

Some 46,000 asylum seekers have passed through the doors of the Vallorbe asylum registration centre since it opened in November 2000.

World Refugee Day takes place on Friday June 20.

LINKS

- Vallorbe (French) (http://www.vallorbe.ch/index_1024.html)
- Federal Migration Office – Swiss asylum procedure (<http://www.bfm.admin.ch/bfm/en/home/themen/asyl/asylverfahren.html>)
- Federal Migration Office (<http://www.bfm.admin.ch/bfm/en/home.html>)
- Swiss Refugee Council (<http://www.osar.ch/>)

URL of this story:<http://www.swissinfo.ch/eng/swissinfo.html?siteSect=105&sid=9239927&ty=st>