

Report from Bonn by Rainer Apel

Refugees are not the problem

A "sudden" rise in xenophobic extremism is coinciding with deliberations on changing immigration laws.

The Germans are increasingly showing symptoms of the same hysteria about immigrants that has seized France and Britain for some time. Since East Germany, population 17 million, hosted only about 150,000 foreigners, while West Germany, with its 62 million, hosted close to 4 million, the ratio of nationals to foreigners has decreased with German reunification.

But the number of refugees from eastern Europe and parts of the developing sector—mostly Sri Lanka, Afghanistan, Iran, Ethiopia, and the Kurdish regions—is increasing: 220,000 came in 1990, and there will be at least 50,000 more this year. In September alone, 28,000 came knocking at Germany's door. Since June, most of the refugees came from the war-battered former state of Yugoslavia. Many others are from Romania, Bulgaria, and Albania.

Not least because of the mass media's sensationalist coverage, which has been amplifying the problem with scare stories that "they are all coming here to take our money and our homes," the disease of xenophobia is spreading. With most Germans, it is still only latent, expressing itself verbally in nasty comments about "these people" and their different life-style.

This problem has existed before, in the late 1950s and early 1960s when the first big waves of "guest-workers" from south Italy, Turkey's Anatolia, Portugal, Spain, Greece, and Yugoslavia arrived. In the meantime, the Germans have accepted these foreigners, especially because they were working and paid taxes as any other

German worker did.

The real problem is the spread of aggressive xenophobia: street clashes with ethnic European youths, and most recently violence against shelters that lodge the refugees. The latest trouble began in late September with the outburst of primarily right-wing extremist rioting against refugee shelters in east Germany.

The small city of Hoyerswerda, in the state of Saxony, made headlines with five days of rioting against a building complex that shelters 100 former guest-workers from Mozambique and another shelter for 230 refugees mostly from Romania, Bulgaria, Albania, and Afghanistan.

The rioters, partially applauded by the townspeople, got into street clashes with several hundred policemen. Finally a police escort moved the foreigners to protected military barracks a way off, and the rioting lost steam; even so, the withdrawal of the police was then celebrated by the rioters as a victory.

Arson attacks on numerous refugee shelters also occurred in west German cities, and continued for days after the unrest in Hoyerswerda had ended.

Strangely enough, that "sudden" outburst of xenophobic extremism coincided with preparations for the late-September round of high-level meetings of government and Parliament officials in Bonn on the asylum and refugee problem, and eventual changes of the asylum and immigration laws.

German politicians at the cabinet level usually speak of the "necessity to solve the immigration problem at

its root, namely in those countries where it emerges," but this is mere rhetoric as long as they hold on—and many German politicians do that—to the malthusian, Club of Rome belief-matrix that there are limits to growth. They believe that the little growth that does exist must be defended at any cost. This leads straight into the doctrine that Germany, being an island of relative wealth in a surrounding world with supposedly limited resources, has to be shielded against the influx of "refugees from poverty" by special anti-immigration laws.

No prominent politician in Bonn has yet called for a "wall of steel" around Germany's borders in the way certain malthusian Americans have proposed to stop illegal immigrants at the U.S.-Mexican border along the Rio Grande.

But some have proposed to stop distributing those seeking asylum among the various German states and communities, and instead, to build decentralized camps all over the country to control the immigrants—a concept quite close to the "wall of steel."

The next step would be to seal the borders against unwelcome and undesirable foreigners, because more and more immigrants require more and more camps, and there will be more immigrants as long as the situation at home does not improve.

Solving the problem at the root requires rapid economic growth and increasing economic stability in all those countries or regions that produce the waves of immigration. Larger development projects in those regions would be invaluable; but proposing that goes utterly against the grain of the politicians' post-industrialist dogma that the era of big economic growth is gone.

So primarily, the problem has to be solved in the minds of the politicians.