

# THE GLOBE AND MAIL

July 17, 2002

## SPECIAL REPORT

By Jane Welsh

*Often in times of war the international community gets so wrapped up in troop movements, weapon trades, and peace negotiations that they forget those that are most vulnerable in times of conflict: the refugees. The war in Brynania has terrorized the lives of common civilians on both sides of the ethnic line, forcing them to leave their homes and flee to camps around the region. In this special four-week report I travel to different refugee camps in the area, reporting on issues that are faced by refugees on a daily basis. This focus this week is on camp 10 located just outside of McGilldishu.*

### **CAMP 10: A Land of Empty Promises**

The only thing that can cool you off on day like today is a cup of hot tea. Although the statement defies all sense of reason, I dutifully make note of the advice, promising myself to try it at the next opportunity. It is a quiet, blistering hot Sunday at the camp, and I sit with my host, Anita Bromelli. A rare pause in the shelling has spread an optimistic mood, as people busily make use of the quiet time to relax or catch up on chores. For the first time in weeks, I don't have to scream in order to be heard.



Anita begins by telling me the story of her best friend, Rilanta Zahmina. The two grew up together in a quite neighborhood in McGilldishu. Anita and her family were ethnic Brn, while Rilanta's family was part of the city's Zaharian minority. Nevertheless, the two neighbors become best friends at a young age and their friendship carried over into their adult lives. Even their husbands and children were close friends and, as such, the two families shared a close and lasting relationship. They would celebrate each other's cultural holidays, and festivals. "It was great," said Anita, "we got to celebrate twice as many occasions as anybody else!" Like in so many other cases the war has put a sudden halt to all such celebrations. The two friends have not seen each other in over a year now, and Anita does not know if she will ever see her best friend again.

Both families were forced to flee their homes as soon as PLFZ shelling began in McGilldishu. The Bromelli family's Brn ethnicity allowed them to safely seek nearby shelter in what is officially termed Camp 10, but what the locals call "Chiniboin Gota" or land of empty promises; indeed that is exactly what the camp is.

The emergency camp is populated by government supporting Brns that have fled fighting from rural areas that have fallen under the control of the PLFZ. Of the 50 000 inhabitants, 60% are female, and 27% of them are children under the age of 12. The camp is 95% Brn.

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This ethnic homogeneity has spared the camp of the ethnic and factional violence that has plagued other area camps.

The sounds of shelling and gunfire are a constant reminder of the fragility of their safety. The front lines are only five kilometers away; as such, the camp is often shelled by the PLFZ. Conditions within the camp itself are also deteriorating at a fast pace. The surrounding urban area is lacking in the resources required to sustain the growing population. Scarce water supplies, as well as the unavailability of firewood, are growing concerns.

Meanwhile, the international community has been of minimal assistance. Because the camp is within Brynanian borders the dwellers are considered to be "internally displaced persons" rather than refugees and, as such, do not receive the same humanitarian attention in terms of international aid.

As a result, the camp is suffering from an onslaught of sanitation diseases such as TB and diphtheria, as well as food and water shortages. The widespread hunger is causing camp inhabitants to quickly become angry and restless. Hostility towards government police who run the camp is on the rise as people begin to lose patience with broken government promises. A seething hatred towards Zaharians grows here too, fuelled by displacement, war, and the extremist broadcasts of the pro-government "Radio Unity".

Anita believes that the government will soon push the rebels back and that she will be able to return to her home. She fears that even if she is alive, her best friend will never return to a Bryn populated area. But she says she will always be waiting with welcoming arms. A smile crosses my face; in a childhood friendship, I see a glimmer of hope for a peaceful resolution to this devastating war.

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*This week's focus is on camp six, one of two camps located across the border in Ruritania.*

***Camp 6: Strangers in a Strange Land***

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When camp six was built just within Ruritania borders, it was envisioned to be a small unit that would accommodate around 3000 refugees fleeing fighting in their local communities. Never did they imagine that the camp would grow to house just under 75,000 refugees. The site has become a nightmare for Ruritania. Ethnic Zaharians continue to pile in to the camp tipping the country's fragile ethnic balance.

Safely outside the reach of Brynanian government forces, the camp has also become a training ground for PLFZ soldiers. Within the walls of the camp it is estimated that there are between 300 and 500 militia, a number that is rapidly growing. Many new rebel soldiers are recruited from the growing numbers of child orphans seeking refuge in the camp. The promise of safety and security is reason enough to join the militia.



Even though the world community has often condemned the PLFZ for their recruitment of child soldiers the sight of a small boy with an AK-47 is a familiar one. I have often tried to talk to them, but most are shy and unapproachable, often weary of a foreigner's presence. The last one I attempted to approach spat at me and ran away, knowing full well that I would not chase after him. They quickly realize that the weapon in their hand is an instrument of command; and when wielded correctly can be a great source of power.

The most vulnerable of all are the younger women, some of whom have been repeatedly attacked and raped by gun wielding teenage soldiers. Sometimes attacks are politically motivated, the by-product of tensions between Zaharian factions. Ruritanian forces maintain security checkpoints around the camp, but do not have any presence within the camp. In any case, few of the refugees would regard the Ruritanians as a source of security, given their support for the hated Brynanian government. Instead, the camp is left under the control of PFLZ militia. Petrov Armstrong-Zahar, a local Zaharian rebel commander, vows that crimes go punished by his forces. "If we catch criminals, we shoot them," he explains bluntly. Still, the air of insecurity is palpable.

Many of the inhabitants I speak to are anxious to leave the camp and return home to begin rebuilding. They are frustrated by having to live in hostile conditions, which are deteriorating further. Ruritania has made it clear to the international community that they want little to do with the refugees fleeing over the border. Increased Ruritanian military presence around the camp fences and border crossings have insured that refugees are effectively contained. The feeling that they are uninvited guests in a strangers land has fuelled a desire amongst the refugees to return home.

The general prediction by most inhabitants is that in a few weeks McGilldihu will surrender and fall under PFLZ control. News of PLFZ advances are always met with exuberance and excitement- one step closer to home for many refugees. Unfortunately the reality of the

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situation is that even with a PLFZ victory, repatriation will be a complicated and difficult process. First they must concentrate on rebuilding houses and homes that have been destroyed in the war. Then the long process of de-mining fields must occur before they can return to farming their land. Each field must be checked manually by a worker on their hands and knees, tapping every square inch of land with a thin pointer rod. The process can take months to clear one field.

*Disclaimer: This is not the real Globe and Mail. Brynania is not a real country and exists as part of a fictional conflict simulation.*

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