

Returnees from Switzerland fear bleak future in Lanka. (1994, May 22). *Sunday times*.

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By Rita Sebastian

GENEVA — Nathan fled his home in Jaffna in October 1990 leaving behind his wife and four children. Five days later and 300,000 rupees poorer (that's the fee he paid an agent), Nathan flew into Italy and crossed the border into Switzerland. For him it was a safe haven, away from his war-torn homeland.

Today Nathan, 49, laid off from his job in a factory and living on the dolé of 750 Swiss francs a month, faces the prospect of being repatriated to Sri Lanka. It's unfair, says Nathan of the arrangements between the governments of Sri Lanka and Switzerland to begin repatriating around 12,000 of the 25,000 Sri Lankan asylum seekers in Switzerland, in the next few years.

Monitored by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), the repatriation programme is scheduled for sometime in

May. Initially 300 will be returned in 1994 and 300 in 1995. "We fled to this country because our lives were at risk, and it is we who can decide as to when it is safe to return" says Nathan. With hardly any money in his hands, he faces a bleak, uncertain future when he gets back.

Krishnan, 28, is one of the more fortunate ones. He left Jaffna in 1987, made his way via Moscow and Berlin into Switzerland and began to put down roots in his adopted homeland. Two years ago he sponsored the fiancée he left behind and married her in Switzerland. He not only earns a fair wage of 3,700 Swiss francs monthly working in a factory that turns out air-conditioners, but also possesses a permit that allows him to remain in the country. Although his permit is renewable every year he is not unduly worried.

But since the signing of the agreement between the two countries in Janu-

ary this year, some asylum seekers like Mohamed, have withdrawn their asylum applications and opted to return home. That's not an unusual phenomenon, says Marcus Loosli, Secretary General of OSAR, the Swiss Organisation for Aid to Refugees. If you pressure 50 to leave, six times that number are expected to voluntarily opt to return.

Loosli dismisses the recession theory as a reason for repatriation. Twenty years ago the same excuse was made when the Italians flooded the country, says Loosli.

OSAR is one of the refugee organisations that is resisting the repatriation programme. The main reasons being that there is no political solution in sight to end the on-going conflict between the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) and government forces in the island's northeast provinces and the uncertainty of when

the Tigers would launch their next attack prompting a retaliatory attack by an army, which he describes as still "not properly controlled".

Loosli does however admit that if people are to be sent back then it's better done within the framework of an agreement rather than having no agreement at all.

Among the 16 recommendations made to the Swiss government by a fact finding mission to the island (which included Loosli) who met with a cross section of public officials, politicians and several non-governmental organisations (NGOs), is that every returnee be issued with an identity card, that every returnee allowed to stay in the reception centres that will house them when they arrive in Sri Lanka until such time as they decide to leave and that besides the UNHCR, the local Red Cross and other refugee organisations will be involved in guaranteeing

the safety of the returnees.

The more significant of the recommendations however is that the Swiss government pressure the Colombo government to finding a political solution to the conflict, and also publicly take a stand against the LTTE.

According to a Swiss official half a million Swiss francs are channelled monthly to the war effort in the northeast by Sri Lankan Tamils in Switzerland. "The channelling of funds through Colombo is more effective and faster than a bank, says the official.

But what seems to have been ignored is the fact that the Sri Lankans have been accepted as "reliable and hardworking" employees. Most of them categorised as "help workers" are employed in restaurants.

At the Rosti Bar at the Zurich railway station you'll find an all-Sri Lankan staff. From the

cooks to the waiters who serve the flaked potato pancake, a Swiss speciality, are all Tamils. Loosli talks of the factory manager who said, "I would prefer two Tamils to five jobless Swiss" and a recent advertisement that specified "Swiss, Italians and Tamils". That's how well most of the asylum seekers have integrated into the community, says Loosli.

The repatriation programme is essentially a move to effectively close the door to new arrivals, says an official at the Sri Lankan mission in Geneva.

Upto now only a small minority have got refugee status in Switzerland with around 900 being deported since 1986 for abusing the laws of the country while their asylum applications were pending. Nobody yet knows as to who will be among the first to be repatriated. Nathan could well be one of them.