

Coping with the metropolis: forced migrants in Istanbul

by Bediz Yilmaz

In Tarlabasi, an inner-city slum neighbourhood of Istanbul, the majority of the population are Kurds who, in the last 10-15 years, have migrated from their villages in eastern and southeastern Anatolia.

These forced migrants are among the most destitute people in Istanbul. Why were they forced to migrate? How are their circumstances different from economic migrants? What are the forced migrants' survival strategies?

Between 1984 and 2000, armed conflict between the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) and the Turkish army killed more than 32,000 people and generated great social and economic upheaval. In conflict-affected areas industrial and agricultural production came to a standstill. Significant causes of forced migration were forcible recruitment of civilians as village guards to fight the PKK and the state-sponsored depopulation of around three thousand villages and hamlets (plus burning of homes and fields) in order to deprive the PKK of logistical support. Nearly three million people have fled to the cities.

According to a report by Human Rights Watch in 1995, "the government's counterinsurgency methods have created a huge underclass of embittered and impoverished internal refugees, whose homes and livelihoods have been abruptly destroyed by the state. These refugees have moved to squatter settlements throughout Turkey's cities, providing the PKK with a potential base for future organising and presenting Turkey with a difficult social and economic crisis".

What makes this new migrant population different from previous rural inhabitants who have migrated to the *gecekondu* (squatter) settlements of Turkish cities is:

- the newcomers had to migrate as whole families, whereas their predecessors were part of chain-migration process, leaving the place of origin gradually as the pioneers settled down in the cities and found employment

- Kurdish conflict-affected migrants had to leave their villages with no preparation: they continue to literally arrive in the city overnight
- all contact with the villages is cut off, since either the village is destroyed completely or is, to all intents and purposes, inaccessible; forced migrants are consequently deprived of the possibility of subsistence-provision from the villages, an important resource of subsistence for rural-to-urban migrants.

The survival strategies of forced migrants in Tarlabasi consist of generating additional income by making use of additional labour - child labour. Street vending constitutes the bulk of employment in Tarlabasi and child labour is extensive. For families with no income or income-generating skills, child labour is usually the only way they can assure their own survival. Children also work in manufacturing warehouses for extremely low wages. Families struggle to minimise expenses by trying to secure maximum external assistance in terms of material goods such as food, clothing, medicines and fuel, etc.



While these are distributed by district and municipal officials (and during elections by political parties) the ability of the state to provide welfare is declining under the impact of structural adjustment. Deepening income inequity, worsening living conditions of the poorest and the spatial concentration of poverty in certain neighbourhoods of Istanbul and other cities suggest that without radical economic and political change in Turkey the traditional family, kinship, religion or ethnicity based networks of solidarity will come under unprecedented stress.

Bediz Yilmaz is a PhD student at the Institut Français d'Urbanisme, University of Paris 8.
Email: garibb@yahoo.com

Working children in Istanbul

