

## A life in the day of Louise Druke – from Almaty to Dushanbe



I enjoyed a Sunday morning breakfast with fresh fruits (bought at the street kiosks between meetings) and a mug of café au lait fait maison (croissants being far too away). A yoga exercise helped me to prepare for this special day, which was to be

my last mission within Central Asia. I reviewed the local papers and listened to the radio especially tuning in to know what the weather would be like. The weekend Russian lesson had been cancelled due to the mission but I managed to read a few pages of the text that Ludmilla, my teacher, had asked me to review for the next class. I called the airport to check that the plane from Almaty was on schedule and then dealt with the most urgent emails and finalised arrangements over the phone with UNHCR in Dushanbe for the reception of the Tajik returnees from Almaty, the “City of the Apple” in Kazkhstan.

I reflected on what some of these refugees might have lived through after the civil war in Tajikistan in 1992, when some 600,000 persons were internally displaced and another 60,000 had sought refuge in northern Afghanistan. Several tens of thousands were believed to have fled into Central Asian countries. Five years later, the signing of the Peace Accord in Moscow had paved the way for the repatriation of Tajik refugees from northern Afghanistan and Central Asian countries. Thanks to the field survey which the Kazakh Red Cross and Red Crescent Society carried out in coordination with UNHCR, data on some 6,000 Tajiks were collected. Some Tajiks had expressed their desire to go home as soon as possible.

Stopping at a colleague’s home for a second morning coffee, I managed to quickly catch up with local and international politics and found out that after the hot Almaty summer, many of my foreign colleagues were back from extended leave from their respective countries. I was happy to learn that the only expatriate medical doctor in the country was also back from leave. I stopped at the market to buy water and fruit for the trip and finally stopped for a quick swim before Dimitri, our driver, came to drive me to the airport for 11:00 a.m.

Arriving at the airport, I immediately spotted “our returnees” in their traditional lovely colourful Tajik clothes; the children were all dressed up as if they were going to big party in their best Sunday dress. This trip was going to be special for all of us. While the processing and checking-in was in progress, my thoughts wandered: in 1977, on my first UNHCR assignment at HQs and in West African countries, I had assisted the Namibians to leave the frontline state refugee camps to receive post-primary education in Western African countries. Here I had developed the hope and desire to assist also in their eventual return home.

Now these happy faces in front of me reminded me again of the Namibian returnees whose repatriation I had had the privilege to co-ordinate in the late summer/fall of 1989. At that time, colleagues and I often started our day at 3:30 a.m. at the airport of Luanda in order to ensure that the four components for the return were there: the refugees, the plane, the fuel and the pilot (when one of them (usually) was missing, we would have to improvise). Those faces were even happier as, after many years of exile in camps in Angola and abroad, they were going to set up for the first time their independent State of Namibia. Traces of the influences of the asylum countries flickered in the excited chatter as returnees from Cuba and African countries spoke happily in Spanish, Russian and Swedish.

These happy faces also reminded me of not so happy faces of the Chilean returnees whom I met on arrival at the airport in Santiago on their way home from exile during my time heading the UNHCR in Santiago in 1983-85. The same regime of General

Pinochet, which had been the cause of the flight, was still in place at that time.

The joy of the returnees overflowed from the flight into the airport as the Tajiks met with relatives and friends. Despite all the difficulties, which still had to be overcome during the re-integration into their home areas (whether conflict-or post-conflict areas), the powerful elements of speaking their mother language again and breathing the air in their home helped them to face difficult situations. Even if

homes and families had been destroyed, it was still home.

After all the refugees had left for their respective areas of origin, my colleagues and I met over dinner by candle-light and enjoyed some good local food and companionship on this historical Sunday evening. We compared notes on work and living conditions, on music and specialities of the region.

At the end of this day, I reflected on how both “my” Namibian and Chilean refugees had ceased to be refugees. The former had successfully set up and developed their independent State and the Chileans had managed to get back a democratically elected government. I went to bed with the hope that these Tajik returnees would also cease to be refugees, that they would eventually overcome the conflict and post-conflict problems in their home country.

*Louise Druke was Head of UNHCR office in Kazakhstan, Oct. 1997 – Oct. 1999*



***Do you have a story about an interesting, challenging, funny, exciting, or even scary day in your life?***

***Why not share it with colleagues? Send an email to HQSROO to get your story published in a Life in a day of.....***