Albanian Refugees From Kosovo Opt Not to Fill Open Slots to U.S.

By Daniel Pearl

SKOPJE, Macedonia -- America may be the destination of choice for most of the world's huddled masses, but it has become a last resort for ethnic Albanians who don't want to return to Kosovo.

The U.S., which two months ago offered to absorb 20,000 refugees from besieged Macedonia, still has at least 5,000 slots available, Western officials here say. Meanwhile, almost every other country has filled its quota and stopped taking refugees, as Albanians continue to pour back into Kosovo in the wake of the peace agreement enforced by the North Atlantic Treaty Organization.

"We think of the U.S. as the land of milk and honey, but it's not always that way," says Sean E. Callahan, a Washington immigration lawyer who took a leave from his job with the firm Rogers & Wells to help process the Kosovo emigrants here. Mr. Callahan, who once did similar work with Vietnamese refugees, says the Albanians ask tougher questions, like who will pay for their children's education.

So Far Away

United Nations officials say refugees made the U.S. a second choice because it is so far away, with a language and culture relatively unfamiliar to them. Riding a van into a processing center for U.S. emigrants, 19-year old Hidajete Hajrizi says she knows of America only through the German-dubbed movies shown on TV. Ibush Ramadani, a 23-year-old shop owner who arrived in Macedonia last month, says he was at the center, run by the nonprofit International Organization for Migration, because "the Germans were not registering anymore." If things don't work out in the U.S., he says he will return to Kosovo, even though his house and shop were destroyed.

Also, the U.S. got a halting start in contributing to the world-wide effort to shelter 100,000 refugees. The U.S. proposed, at first, to shelter refugees at the Marine base at Guantanamo Bay, Cuba. Later, the U.S. reversed course and offered refugees a better deal than the Europeans did: not just temporary asylum but full residency, with the right to work and apply for citizenship.

By then, refugees were swarming to representatives of western European countries, who quickly put them on planes to their new temporary shelters. The U.S. had to put applicants through a review by the Immigration and Naturalization Service, which asked them questions such as the name of their hometown train station to make sure the applicants weren't Macedonians posing as Kosovo refugees.
Skipping Flights

So far, fewer than 9,000 Kosovars have taken chartered flights to the U.S. Some 5,000 more are scheduled to go. But with the war over, as many as half of them are skipping flights or interviews. The U.S. now is restricting new applications to people with relatives in the U.S.

The issue didn't come up during President Clinton's visit to the Stenkovec refugee camp Tuesday. But the president did stop by the United Kingdom's processing center, where a doctor got the president's quick agreement to help absorb 311 remaining refugees with special medical problems. The British immigration workers, preparing their last refugee flight last week, gave the president one of the T-shirts they have been wearing, borrowing a slogan of their favorite Macedonian beer: "Everything is Possible."

The U.S. quota could be filled in time; refugees are still being processed from the Bosnian war, which ended in 1995. Some Albanians here are from towns in northern Kosovo still occupied by Serbs. Others returning from trips across the border may decide living in the U.S. is better.

As he rode an International Organization for Migration van through mostly empty Stenkovec last week, staffer Patrick Corcoran was besieged by dozens of asylum seekers wondering where their applications stand. "We're the only game in town now," he says.