

Lifebelt of care and hope

New Minsk tailor's shop — employing refugees from Afghanistan and Iran — sews bed linen, napkins and tablecloths, while staff jointly celebrate holidays and share culinary secrets

By Yekaterina Medvedskaya

Farida Kasim works at the World of Comfort tailor's shop, as a cutter. She loves to sew, although, in her native Afghanistan, she was a teacher rather than a seamstress. "Life does not ask us what we'd like to happen," Farida muses. She believes grumbling to be a waste of time; it's better to accept life as it is.

When war broke out in Afghanistan, Farida had no doubt where to go, as her husband had studied in Belarus, having friends here. "Your country has become a true second home to us," she admits. "Our daughters grew up here, attending a nursery alongside Belarusian children." Farida's elder daughter, Lina, now works at Minsk's branch of the Red Cross Society, while Nila is a university student, dreaming of becoming a TV host. Farida would love to finally move into a flat of her own. "Each move is like fleeing again, however small," she admits sorrowfully. "I'm dreaming of a peaceful life..."

Another seamstress, Shaima Khabibula, has come from Iran. In fact, she is qualified as a doctor and hopes to one day return to her favourite profession. At present, her husband has no job and their five children are too

young, so the World of Comfort is a lifeline.

The World of Comfort is a social enterprise, established by the International Public Charitable Organisation of Afghan Refugees — Afghan Community. It aims to support those facing tough times rather than making a profit but business principles are applied. "From the very first moment, we were looking ahead, as people need jobs not only for a couple of months," Director Ilyaz Safi tells us. "Tablecloths and bed linen are already widely available on the Belarusian market, so there is no great demand. However, buyers like to find something a little unusual, especially at an attractive price. Taking this into consideration, our brand uses original designs. We buy pure cotton from a Baranovichi plant (in the Minsk Region), and decorative materials from Mogilev. Importantly, our prices are lower than those offered by other producers."

Just 12 people are employed by the venture, with Belarusians accounting for half of the staff and the others being refugees. "Having refugees work alongside local residents helps them adapt and integrate," believes Safi Saifurakhman, the Chairman of the International Public Charitable Organisation of Afghan



Afghan refugees work at World of Comfort

Refugees — Afghan Community. "Although the women speak different languages, they quickly find mutual understanding and common interests." Moreover, all employees jointly celebrate national holidays — both Belarusian and Muslim. "Our chil-

dren and husbands attend them," says Farida. "We are like a large friendly family."

More refugees are soon to be employed, after the New Year celebrations, to help the World of Comfort achieve its larger plans. "We'll be gradually mastering the Belarusian market, and will attempt to export to foreign markets" says Mr. Safi. "We need to justify the money being injected into the enterprise." Equipment has been purchased with financial help from the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. "People receive jobs and, accordingly, can earn money for a living," stresses the Programme Officer at the UNHCR Office in Belarus, Tatiana Selivanova. "In future, some of the generated revenue will be used for business development, while the rest will be used to raise salaries and create new jobs."

The UNHCR Office is currently running a tender to choose the best project to help refugees in Belarus find employment or set up their own business. Business proposals are being accepted from all citizens with refugee status, with financial aid provided to the winner, to help them realise their idea.

The MT's reference:

As of October 1st, 2011, 833 people from 13 countries had refugee status in Belarus, with most coming from Afghanistan: 590. Others comprise Georgians, Tajiks, Azerbaijanis, Ethiopians, Palestinians, Iranians, Indians, Armenians, Iraqis, Cameroonians, Liberians and Rwandans.

Returning to former place

Tsna River redirected to its former path, to preserve its biological diversity — an unprecedented event for Belarus

By Konstantin Vulsaeu

The redirection of the River Tsna to its natural path through Srednyaya (Middle) Pripyat Reserve, in the Luninets District, is part of a UNDP project entitled *Catalysing Sustainability of the Wetland Protected Area System in Belarusian Polesie*. Alexander Kozulin, a leading research officer at the Scientific Practical Centre for Bioresources at the National Academy of Sciences of Belarus, tells us, "The construction of a channel connecting the Tsna and Pripyat rivers in a direct line has divided the water flow and led to the Tsna losing depth. It has affected the most important fish spawning areas in the region. The lack of flow has resulted in the old floodplain of the River Tsna becoming overgrown with shrubs, which has changed its riverbank ecosystem. Many rare plants and animals found only in Polesie's low lying meadows are losing their habitat."



Boat trips through Pripjat's unique flood plains enjoy great popularity

"To return the water flow to its previous path, the engineers have built a special dam and cleared the previous riverbed, located close by, to allow the water to find its new channel easily. The dam is providing the natural riverbed with sufficient water while saving the village of Kozhan-Gorodok from flooding," notes Alexey Chistodarsky, an information officer for the UNDP *Polesie* project.

Pits for overwintering fish

have been restored at Lake Bezymyannoe (a flood plain water reservoir, located near Volyanskies bridges on the River Pripyat) as part of the *Catalysing Sustainability of the Wetland Protected Area System in Belarusian Polesie* project. The lake was once among the most important wintering areas for precious commercial fish but almost completely lost its significance as the water grew shallower and overgrown. Now, the

water reservoir's bottom has been deepened, its banks have been cleared of vegetation and the channel connecting the lake with the River Pripyat has been restored.

Specialists believe that, this winter, the water reservoir will be completely ready to fulfil its function as a wintering pit for local fish: bream, tench, catfish, orfe and goldfish. This will allow them to stay alive while the surface is frozen.

Grabovka first for virtual tourism

By Polina Yevgenieva

Teacher from Gomel Region creates electronic map of Belarusian settlements

The map enables us to tour rural villages without even leaving home. "By clicking on the name of a settlement, a website user can 'promenade' its streets and view sites of interest, while learning of its history from photos," explains Kirill Demusev, a teacher of computer science from Grabovka kindergarten and school.

Kirill has long wanted to create such a programme and it was his pupils who finally inspired him to do so. "We often take the children walking and take many photos," continues Kirill. "The children were keen to collate these into an album but I suggested a virtual alternative: placing them on a website."

Grabovka is the first settlement in Belarus to

enjoy virtual tourism, with Kirill planning to extend the project, inviting schoolchildren from across Belarus to send shots of their villages to be included on the website; schools from neighbouring villages have already joined in.

Kirill is submitting his programme for the *100 Ideas for Belarus* project, hoping to attract as many people as possible in the creation of the map. "Applications have been received from over 1,100 entrants," notes Maxim Basalyga, the second secretary of the Central Committee of the Belarusian Republican Youth Union. "The number of ideas increases each day. Around a hundred applications are arriving daily, so the expert council has extended the deadline to December 1st."

Young Belarusians living abroad are also entering the contest, with seven proposals received from Moldova, one from Canada and several from Russia.