

# The death of Semira Adamu and deportation policy in Europe

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Semira Adamu was just 20 years old when she died while being deported from Belgium.

On September 22, 11 gendarmes took the young Nigerian women, bound in handcuffs, to a plane at Brussels airport to be deported. When she started shouting and trying to resist her deportation, two of the officers pressed a cushion over her face. Semira fell unconscious; she died later that evening. According to doctors she succumbed to a brain hemorrhage resulting from a contusion.

One of the two policemen responsible is known for his brutal actions against asylum seekers. He was already the subject of disciplinary proceedings last year.

The tragic fate of Semira Adamu has shaken Belgium. Over 5,000 people gathered outside the Cathedral of Saint Michael in Brussels as a memorial service for the young women took place September 28. The next day Louis Tobback, the Socialist Party Interior Minister, resigned after admitting political responsibility for the violent death of the asylum seeker.

Just a few days before she died, Semira Adamu appeared on a television documentary in which she attacked the inhuman conditions inside Steenokkerzell, a prison north of Brussels used to hold deportees. The authorities had tried six times before to deport Semira, but their attempts had failed because of protest actions.

Semira Adauma fled from Nigeria because her stepmother (her real parents are deceased) tried to marry her off to a 65-year-old man who already had three wives. She had first sought refuge in Togo but was returned to Nigeria several times. In March this year she was able to get to Belgium with the help of some friends. However, all she saw of the country was the airport and the deportation prison in Steenokkerzell.

Semira's application for asylum in Belgium was refused on the grounds that the Geneva Convention does not cover cases of mistreated women. Even following her death the government representative responsible for refugees, Luc de Smet, defended this decision. He claimed that the young woman had not been able to 'credibly and coherently' support her application.

The case of Semira Adamu is not an isolated one. The grand coalition government in Belgium under the leadership of Luc Dehaene, composed of Christian Democrats and the Socialist Party, has planned for 15,000 deportations this year. The Belgian 'Committee Against Deportations' reported that by the summer some 5,000 had already been carried out, often involving the most brutal mistreatment.

In June the case of a 17-year-old Somali youth caused a public uproar. Fuaad Ahmed Nur was deported to Rwanda on June 29. He had left Somalia at the age of 12 after his parents died in a massacre. Until November 1997 he lived in a refugee camp in Ethiopia. When this camp was closed down he fled to Rwanda. There a group of Belgian missionaries helped him get to Brussels, in the hope that he might be safer there. However, since Ahmed traveled to Belgium from a so-called 'safe third country' his asylum application was immediately turned down.

The sad fate of such young refugees in Belgium casts a sharp light on European asylum policy as a whole. As European Monetary Union approaches, the barriers that face the major corporations' economic activities across the continent are falling. However, new obstacles are being placed in the way of those seeking asylum from outside the European Union.

Germany has taken the lead in abolishing refugees' democratic rights. In 1993 the *Bundestag* (parliament)

introduced severe restrictions on the rights of asylum seekers in a measure which relied on the votes of the SPD to get onto the statute books. Those who arrived in Germany from a country which was not officially recognised as a 'persecuting state', and who had come via a 'safe third country' rather than directly, could henceforth have their asylum applications automatically rejected. They were now to be classed as 'illegal immigrants' and could be turned back at the border or point of entry.

Since then the government has sharpened its repression against refugees each year. Benefits paid to asylum seekers to provide the basic necessities of life, such as food, clothing and shelter, have been drastically cut. At the beginning of the year Interior Minister Manfred Kanther even suggested ending all payments to those who had their asylum applications turned down. The border guard and the police have declared open season on 'illegal' immigrants and stowaways. Recently, seven Albanians from Kosovo died when the bus they were in crashed after being pursued by the border guard in a high-speed chase.

The German government has also put pressure on its EU counterparts to adopt similar measures. The 'safe third state' rule now applies in many other countries including Belgium. Germany has also extended visa requirements to 135 states outside Europe; imposed high fines on air carriers that transport passengers without proper documents or with falsified documents, effectively turning them into an extension of the border guard; agreed to the European-wide exchange of computerised information about refugees; stepped up its patrols on external borders and within the country as well; and, finally, implemented the routine imprisonment of those who have their asylum applications rejected. Interior Minister Kanther has also called for the introduction of fingerprinting for all refugees.

At the beginning of the year, Kanther said Italy would have to accept all the consequences if a group of Kurdish refugees being considered for asylum by the Italian government travelled on to Germany.

According to Herbert Leuninger, formerly a spokesman from the refugee organisation ProAsyl, 'Generally, it is a case of preventing refugees getting to Europe at all.' Addressing a conference on European asylum policy, Leuninger also said, 'methods of

preventing and dissuading refugees that have above all been developed in Germany are now routine in all other European countries to one degree or another.'

The fate of Semira Adamu also highlights another fact. Increasingly it is children and young people who are being ruthlessly arrested and deported. According to estimates by international aid agencies, there are presently at least 6 million children seeking refuge. Currently there are 10,000 'unaccompanied' minors seeking asylum in Germany.

Germany also provides some of the worst examples relating to children and the young. At the end of 1995 the German government faced the criticism of the UN Committee for Children's Rights. Despite this, Germany intensified its attacks on foreign children, even introducing a visa requirement in January 1997.

On the occasion of World Children's Day on September 20, ProAsyl, which works together with the European Council for Refugees (ECRE), pointed to the 'absolutely negative balance sheet of the German government' on this question. Heiko Kauffman, the spokesman for ProAsyl, said, 'cases such as the deportation to Vietnam without any prior warning of a 12 year old; the sending of a 14-year-old Rumanian girl to Bucharest unaccompanied, and the expulsion of a 16-year-old Kurdish girl to Turkey, even against the advice of the German embassy, show that the 'well-being of the child' is being subordinated to an unparalleled ideology of deterrence and closing borders.'



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