

Human rights in Austria: The brutal death of asylum-seeker Markus Omafuma

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The savage treatment and brutal death of a Nigerian asylum-seeker in Austria casts a harsh light on the character of the predominantly social-democratic governments in Europe. The same regimes which justify their bombing of Yugoslavia on the grounds of human rights are trampling on human rights in their own countries.

Nigerian Markus Omafuma suffocated on the flight from Vienna to Lagos, as he was being deported by the Austrian government. Three officials of the Austrian interior ministry had bound his hands and feet, and repeatedly covered his mouth with tape. He was 25 years old.

Markus Omafuma had travelled via Cameroon and Moscow to Austria in September 1998 because, as he informed asylum officers, he faced death threats from a religious sect in his own country. According to the national asylum office in Austria this did not constitute sufficient grounds for asylum. His application was rejected December 7 and his extradition to Nigeria legally confirmed. The period up to his flight to Lagos was spent in a deportation centre. On May 1, five days before the expiry of the deportation order, Markus Omafuma was taken to the airport by three officers from the interior ministry.

Fearful of what awaited him in Nigeria, Omafuma fought against his deportation. The police officers bound his hands and feet and carried him into the aircraft.

A Dutch passenger, Carlo Van Nierop, described what took place next in an interview given a few days later to the magazine *News*. "I saw how they wrapped this transparent tape around his head 10 or 20 times. It was crazy! Then they tied at least 10 metres of this tape, up and down around the upper part of his body."

Van Nierop, his wife and 28 Dutch children, members of a dance group, were on their way to a tour of Bulgaria. He repeatedly importuned the Austrian officials. "These people were five rows diagonally behind me, the aircraft was still on the ground. And there I saw how they put the tape over his mouth. It was a shocking thing to see. I thought immediately the man wasn't getting any air." Omafuma "had said nothing" at the beginning, and only began to protest as he was taped. Then frantically struggling for air, he attempted to breathe through his nose.

Because his death throes were "frightfully loud" Markus

Omafuma was beaten by police, according to the testimony of Van Nierop: "A police officer yelled quite loudly, 'Shut up!' And then there was the sound of three punches. Then the man was quiet" (cited from *Der Standard*, May 11, 1999).

Balkan Air's head radio operator, Vasil Iliev, also described what happened. "The black man moved around wildly and repeatedly struggled for air but the officers did nothing. In the end I couldn't stand it any more. The man really appeared to be fighting for his life." Shortly before landing in a stopover in Sofia he demanded that the officers take the tape off the prisoner to let him breathe, but they only felt his pulse. "Shortly afterwards he became quieter and quieter and finally stopped moving."

Markus Omafuma met an agonising death through suffocation as his tormentors watched.

The extremely brutal and openly racist behaviour of the police and authorities has aroused alarm and revulsion across Austria. Between 3,000 and 4,000 protesters took part in demonstrations in Vienna on May 8, demanding the resignation of the politicians responsible, particularly the Minister for the Interior, Karl Schlägl, and the Minister of Police, Stiedl, both members of the Social Democratic Party of Austria, the ASP.

Since then criticism of the Austrian government, consisting of the ASP and the conservative People's Party, the APP, has grown louder.

Interior Minister Schlägl has rejected all demands for resignations and defended the officers of his ministry, cynically stating that the deportee died "suddenly" after experiencing a "condition similar to unconsciousness". ASP Chancellor Viktor Klima is openly supporting his interior minister. While the Bulgarian attorney-general found the three escorting officers fully responsible for Omafuma's death and ascertained grounds for murder, the accused were returned to Austria and not even suspended from duty.

Replying to criticism, the director general for Public Safety, Michael Sika, stated: "Anyone who has experienced the energy with which these people try to defend themselves, refrains from criticism."

Both Schlägl and Sika deny any knowledge of the "pacification procedures". The fact is that about 17,000 people are deported annually from Austria, many through forceful

measures. Last year 2,889 were deported by plane.

“The use of force,” wrote Michael Völker in a commentary in the Austrian newspaper *Der Standard*, “is based on law. Death appears to be a calculated risk in enforcing the restriction of rights to asylum. Sympathy, consideration or attention to human rights are not provided for by law.” Forceable measures as well as “pressure points” are legitimate means.

The fact that hardly any other airline outside of Balkan Air is prepared to undertake deportations gives an indication of the brutal measures used in effecting them. Human rights organisations argue that the measures used in Omafuma's case are in no way unusual. The organisation “Asylum in Need” has documented a case where a Nigerian was sedated by injection.

In an open letter to their ministers, a number of Social Democratic parliamentarians made clear “that this is not only about a single tragedy”.

Indignation followed the statement made by the Viennese Chief of External Police Stefan Sturecky in connection with deportation procedures: “If we always waited until the expiry of the deportation order, we would have nothing but protests and we wouldn't deport anyone. Some lawyers use all available legal means.”

Yet the brutal death of Markus Omafuma and the determined defence of the forcible deportation measures being used have a wider significance than the almost daily incitement of racism in the Alpine republic, directed especially against Africans. The Social Democratic Party and its governing head are using the case to make a definite shift to the right.

By law, every attempt by refugees to enter Austria by land is to be taken as a basis for the non-recognition of the right to asylum. The right to appeal is to be cut back and human rights information to be further reduced. All nations bordering on Austria are to be defined as safe states, even though it has been determined that neighbouring Slovakia is not secure and Hungary only qualifies conditionally.

Under the designation of “police co-operation” authorities within reciprocating countries dealing with asylum matters are to be informed about any criticisms, statements and testimonies of asylum applicants.

By its proposed toughening of asylum laws, the ASP is taking on much of the platform of the neo-fascist ALP and is preparing for a closer partnership with Haider's “liberals”. In the upcoming European elections the ALP is expected to increase its electoral support.

The Social Democrats have for years attempted to forestall the neo-fascists by taking on important components of their racist policies. In doing so they have not only poisoned the political atmosphere in the country, but also strengthened the influence of the extreme right. At the national elections in autumn, the ALP could become the strongest party, and an influential wing of the ASP is steering it towards a partnership with the ALP.

So it is by no means a coincidence that Interior Minister

Schlögl is basing himself on support from sections of the ALP to overturn demands for resignations. Many Austrian warders are members of the racist ALP police union. Its chairman, Josef Kleindienst, stated immediately after the death of Omafuma, “Without doubt, the forcible measures used were known and approved of within the interior ministry,” and the ASP should unequivocally defend the measures. Schlögl would be defended against “left-wing bleeding hearts, as long as he justified such a trust,” Kleindienst declared.

Opposition within Social Democracy comes from the Union of Socialist Students and Socialist Youth. They have demanded Schlögl's resignation and held the “cowardly and inhuman politics of the ASP” responsible for the death of Markus Omafuma, condemning its “currying of favour with the ALP and the *Kronenzeitung*” (the notorious right-wing Austrian newspaper).

The case of the murdered Markus Omafuma sheds light not only on the rotten political relationships within Austria. It is a link in a chain of state cover-ups of attacks on foreigners not only in Austria, but in the whole of Europe.

The cases of Joy Gardner in Britain and Semira Adamu in Belgium have become widely known. On July 28, 1993, five police officers and an immigration department official broke into the home of Joy Gardner to deport her and her five-year-old son Graeme. Joy was thrown to the ground, tied up and gagged with adhesive tape. She suffocated in front of her son.

In Brussels in September 1998, 20-year-old Nigerian Semira Adamu died after police, attempting to deport her, shoved a cushion over her face for several minutes.

The brutal course of Social Democracy's foreign policy—as partners in the war against Yugoslavia—is mirrored by its policies towards foreigners within Europe and accelerates the incorporation of fascist elements into politics.



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