

The British government and the Kosovar refugees

Labour's milk of human kindness turns sour

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The Blair government says that its participation in the NATO bombing of Yugoslavia is driven by “humanitarian concern” for the plight of the Albanian Kosovars. This claim should be examined critically in light of its treatment of asylum-seekers in general and the Kosovar refugees in particular.

Labour's Immigration and Asylum White Paper is in its final parliamentary stages before passing into law. This legislation is more draconian than anything passed under the previous Conservative administrations. It has been accompanied by newspaper articles and TV coverage presenting the majority of asylum-seekers as bogus, particularly those from Eastern Europe. In areas of the country where refugees from Slovakia and Kosovo have been temporarily stationed, such as the port towns in southeast England, this became particularly vitriolic.

The *Dover Express* last October described East European refugees as “human sewage” in an editorial entitled “We want to wash the dross down the drain”. Similar articles have featured prominently in the mass circulation tabloids. The *Daily Mirror*, in an article headed “Let's send the asylum spongers packing”, wrote: “I don't blame them for coming. But that doesn't mean they have the right to be here. Who is being persecuted in Romania? The answer is nobody.... It's not racist to say that every immigrant who sneaks into Britain diminishes life in this country, it's common sense.”

Such statements reveal how the language of hate, usually associated with the fascist right, has been incorporated into mainstream journalism. Last October the *Daily Mail* published an article entitled “Life on Asylum Alley”. This claimed that “bogus” asylum-

seekers were living in the lap of luxury at taxpayers' expense. The article gave the address of one refugee hostel, which was then subject to attack. While local police warned the editors of the *Dover Express* that they could face prosecution for racial incitement, no similar threat has been against the national newspapers.

Home Secretary Jack Straw sought to distance his new white paper from such overtly racist sentiments. In an article printed in the *Guardian* on May 13 he claimed “the reason why the government has brought forward the bill has nothing to do with tabloid headlines or 'criminalising' refugees as some have suggested.” He seemed to be unaware of the irony that his disclaimer appeared under the headline: “Asylum abusers”.

The incongruity between Labour's professed concern for the Kosovar refugees and its reluctance to provide aid and asylum has become ever more glaring. The plight of the refugees amassing in makeshift camps has been manipulated by the mass media to stampede public opinion into supporting military action. But the United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) warned on May 11 that it was running out of money, having received only half the £87 million it needed to fund its operations.

Britain was cited as one of the lowest contributors in a league table of 18 countries. The UNHCR claimed that it had only received £490,000 from the UK, less than the price of one cruise missile and a fraction of the £43 million the British government had spent at that stage of the war. The government responded by claiming it had provided £3.4 million in *direct assistance* to refugees in Macedonia and Albania. If this is true, the rebuttal confirms the government's

continued policy of bypassing the UN, as it did alongside the US when hostilities were declared. This figure still represents just a tiny fraction of the amount Blair had pledged.

It is not the first time that UNHCR has been in conflict with the Blair government over its treatment of refugees. Hope Hanlon, a UNHCR spokesperson, described the government's new Immigration and Asylum legislation as “fundamentally unacceptable and even inhumane”. Last May, the UNHCR issued a letter to the 15 governments of the European Union and Switzerland, calling on them to stop repatriating refugees back to Kosovo. Those affected included Serbs, Montenegrins, Romanians and Muslim Slavs.

The UK was not even included in the initial list of countries available to take in refugees from the overcrowded camps, as the government refused to specify how many it would accept. Over the last months, the Blair government has continuously violated the principle of giving sanctuary to the very people they claim to be rescuing in Yugoslavia.

Claire Short, the International Development Secretary, stated that “moving people out of the region is doing exactly what Milosevic wants.” In an article in the *Sunday Telegraph* April 4, Blair described moves to grant asylum to Kosovar refugees as a “policy of despair”, adding that they should be kept close to Kosovo's borders, to apply “maximum pressure” on Milosevic.

Britain's belated agreement to accept up to 1,000 refugees a week was only secured after much arm twisting within the Europe Union, and government concern that its credibility was becoming compromised in the public eye. The Balkan region was also becoming destabilised, as the poorest economies in Europe, such as Albania and the republics of Montenegro and Macedonia, became the main destination of refugees fleeing the bombing. NATO allies, such as Germany, were becoming increasingly bitter at the fact they had accepted a disproportionate amount of refugees.

The British government has stated that those now arriving from the Balkan refugee camps will be granted leave to remain in the UK, and will be entitled to benefits and to seek employment. This contrasts with the treatment of some 7,000 Kosovar refugees that arrived prior to the NATO bombing, who are still

waiting for their cases to be processed.

The media gives extended coverage to any demonstration of gratitude expressed by the minority of Kosovar refugees who have managed to obtain temporary asylum in Britain and to the Blair's stage-managed visits to the border camps. Meanwhile, the lot of the vast majority of refugees goes largely unreported. Under the terms of the new legislation, those who arrived prior to the outbreak of war, like those seeking asylum from other countries, can be subject to the new powers of search and detention, and will have their rights to cash benefits withdrawn. Instead, they receive vouchers that can be used to claim a limited variety of basic items.

Only a month before the war began, a Kosovan couple who were fleeing from the Drenica region, one of the main centres of the conflict, were imprisoned in Britain. Arriving at Heathrow, en-route to Canada, the couple was discovered to be travelling on false Greek passports. When they tried to claim asylum, the 25-year-old woman, who was pregnant, was sent to Holloway prison, whilst her husband was sent to Wormwood Scrubs. The woman was later released after becoming ill and depressed; her husband is likely to be released only on condition that he wears an electronic tag.

The human rights group Amnesty International is taking up their case. A spokesman for the human rights group commented, “There are two government policies on Kosovan refugees. The high profile one that involves the evacuation of the camps in Macedonia and another hidden policy which applies to the vast majority, who are treated as if they are criminals when in fact they are just seeking protection.”



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