

Spain strengthens borders against African refugees

Vicky Short
2 June 1999

The Spanish government is seeking to further strengthen its borders in order to exclude those fleeing from hunger and war in Africa. Last year, Spain constructed two 4 metre-high steel walls, 7 kilometres in length, on the African side of the Gibraltar Strait. This was to prevent refugees getting across into Spanish Morocco and then on into Spain. The desperation animating those seeking refuge was graphically illustrated at the beginning of this year, when a group of them, caught trying to climb these walls, threw a pregnant woman over so that she could be cared for in a hospital in Spanish Morocco.

The Aznar government has now pledged to spend a further £100 million to shield the southern border of Spain as well. The plan, code-named “South Frontier”, is to be implemented by the Civil Guard. Described as an “Integrated System of External Vigilance” (its Spanish acronym—SIVE), it utilises the latest technology in long-distance radar systems, thermal cameras, night viewfinders, infrared optics, helicopters and patrol boats. The operation will be controlled from a co-ordinating centre in Algeciras, for which the Civil Guard will recruit 300 more policemen.

This complex surveillance system is being devised in order to detect the small, precarious, boats, called *pateras*, used by people attempting to cross from Africa to Spain through the Strait of Gibraltar. At its narrowest point, the distance between Spain and Africa is just 12 kilometres.

The director-general of the Civil Guard explained, “The objective is to mount a system of radar on both sides of the Strait, which can send the information to an integrated information centre to be automatically processed and where thermal cameras will be activated.” These cameras will be able to detect the warmth emitted by a human body, enabling the

authorities to determine how many people are travelling in the *patera*.

What action will then be taken was not explained, but the impact of searchlights, helicopters and patrol boats on those being hunted down is not difficult to predict. Already, large numbers of immigrants have lost their lives while attempting to cross the Gibraltar Strait. Last May, smugglers forced 30 Moroccan immigrants to jump into the water from one of these tiny boats. They were told that they were close to the coast and could reach Spain easily by swimming. In reality, they were still several miles off. In the darkness, 13 drowned and their bodies were washed onto the beach of Arzila.

In addition to SIVE, a new armed border force will be able to use the infrastructure already in place by the Minister of Defence. The government is hoping that the European Union will contribute to the cost of this complicated man-hunting project, arguing that it affects other countries as well, given the elimination of inner-European frontiers contained in the Schengen Treaty.

The Church, the Pro-Human Rights Association, SOS Racism and various political parties have voiced protests against the government's plans. “Church Migrations” accused the government of having lost all ethics and of championing social divisions. Pro-Human Rights declared that if the government went ahead with such a project, it would be breaching the Spanish constitution and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. The Socialist Party opposition said it was a waste of money and proposed, as an alternative, an “in-depth re-consideration” of the Alien Status Law, especially the annual quota for admitting foreign workers. Izquierda Unida (a coalition of left, nationalist and radical groups headed by the Communist Party) said it was “madness” to spend £100 million to shield the Gibraltar Strait, instead of investing it on the

integration of those foreigners already in the country.

All of them agree, however, that immigration into Spain should be stopped and so concur with Spain's role as African gatekeeper for the European Union. Their outrage is targeted in the main, not against the immigration policies of the government, but the criminal layers spawned by such policies who traffic in human misery by running the *pateras*.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact