

French police arrest 210 asylum-seekers

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Thursday morning 6.00 a.m. saw a massive police operation against asylum-seekers in the French port of Calais. In total, 210 arrests were made on the pretext that those detained were seeking illegal entry into Britain, across the Channel.

Riot police swept through the central Saint-Pierre park, where up to 200 refugees, including about 60 children, were camping out. Eighteen of those arrested were threatened with immediate deportation and thirty-five were freed. This leaves 52 men, women and children from Kosovo who have no identity papers and therefore cannot be deported. These were first held in a hospital annex, but later taken to a disused warehouse near the Eurostar terminal, eight miles from Calais. Police patrols have also been reinforced at Paris railway stations.

Prior to the latest sweep, 137 people had been arrested in France over the past eight months, most of them Albanians, for bribing long-distance lorry drivers to hide immigrants in their vehicles. Salvation Army captain Patrick Booth told the *Guardian* newspaper that the Calais city council has passed a law forbidding charities from helping refugees. "We can't decide whether to obey, or respect our sense of duty," he said.

Yannick Imbert, the Calais sub-prefect, said callously, "The Balkan war is now over and there is no longer any reason for these people not to go home. Many of them are desperate to get into Britain because of the country's famously generous policy towards asylum-seekers."

This reference indicates that the Calais swoop is in direct response to the demands made by the Labour government in Britain to call a halt to asylum-seekers entering Dover from France's biggest Channel passenger port. Imbert's comment that "Word has spread that England is an ideal refuge, with a more generous attitude to political refugees" echoes the comment of Conservative Home affairs spokesperson

Ann Widdecombe, who described Britain as a "soft-touch" following conflicts between local residents and asylum-seekers in Dover last weekend.

The Labour government immediately began to disperse the town's 480 or so refugees around the country. Its own draconian response to asylum-seekers is the very opposite of "soft". Home Secretary Jack Straw last month demanded British immigration officers be stationed at French railway stations in order to crack down on those entering the country on Eurostar trains. He warned that unless tough action is taken by the French, he will start fining Eurostar £2,000 for every illegal immigrant caught coming off trains from France. Britain's Immigration Department boasted that its own crackdown had led to the capture of 1,320 people seeking to enter Britain from the former Yugoslavia in June—almost double the number in the same month last year.

Straw's offensive against asylum-seekers has led to charges of human rights abuses. On July 29, the High Court ruled that Britain's prosecution and jailing of thousands of asylum-seekers for travelling with false documents is in breach of its obligations under an international convention on refugees. Lord Justice Simon Brown, sitting with Mr. Justice Newman, said Straw and the Crown Prosecution Service had ignored Britain's obligations under the Geneva Convention. Article 31 states that asylum-seekers should not be penalised for entering a country illegally. The judges noted that the combination of visa requirements and carrier's liability, which penalised ferries and airlines for conveying passengers without documentation, "has made it well nigh impossible for refugees to travel to countries of refuge without false documents".

Refugee organisations estimate that between 500 and 1,000 asylum-seekers have been prosecuted each year for using false documents since prosecutions were stepped up in 1994. Most have been arrested on arrival

and brought before magistrates the next day. Duty solicitors more often than not advised them to plead guilty, because no defence could be offered in law, and they would get a shorter jail term. Refugees have received prison sentences of six to nine months, longer than for offences of committing actual bodily harm, some indecent assaults and burglaries. Straw has let it be known that the ruling may be challenged.



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