

European governments turn against asylum-seekers

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Across Europe, governments are working to expel thousands of asylum-seekers. Over the last months this has taken on the character of a bizarre "ping-pong" game as refugees are thrown out of one country, only to face immediate proceedings against them at their new destination.

The terrible plight facing thousands of displaced people has been highlighted by events over the last month in Dover, England. A xenophobic campaign by the Conservative local authority and press against "bogus" asylum-seekers "sponging" off British taxpayers led to a series of attacks on refugees, culminating in violent clashes between immigrants and local youth. The Labour government subsequently announced it would bring forward sections of its Asylum and Immigration Bill, enabling asylum-seekers to be dispersed around the country. Reacting to Conservative claims that Britain was a "soft touch" for refugees—even Europe's "El Dorado", Home Secretary Jack Straw, could truthfully reply that the new bill was Britain's toughest yet.

The furore grew after an increase in applications for asylum in the UK from 6,230 in June to 6,600 in July was announced. Set against the background of the mass displacement of peoples from the former Yugoslavia during the same period—the result of Serbian military action in Kosovo and NATO's subsequent bombardment of the country—the rise is minuscule. Much of the political row can be attributed to the fact that, on virtually every issue, the Blair government and Conservative opposition occupy the same right-wing territory. Consequently, their efforts to project some differences between them takes on an ever more reactionary character. In this instance, each party sought to proclaim that it alone was the toughest against immigrants, the most concerned with maintaining a "racial balance", etc.

But the asylum controversy has highlighted another crucial issue—the disastrous consequences of the aggressive turn to militarism and neo-colonialism by the Western powers over the last decade, and the cynicism and hypocrisy of their official justifications for it.

By far the largest increase in asylum applications to European countries has been from the former Yugoslavia. According to figures from the United Nations, these accounted for 19 percent of all applications lodged over the last 10 years. During 1998, they formed the largest group of applicants in Europe (27 percent). A further indication of the consequences of imperialist intervention is given by the next major groups of asylum-seekers in Europe—Iraqi citizens. Fleeing a country devastated by constant bombing raids and harsh economic sanctions, they make up 10 percent of the total. Applications from Turkey—where the West has given semi-official endorsement to a pogrom against its Kurdish population—are 6

percent.

Straw acknowledged that the rise in applications was a "Europe-wide problem", but said that the factors involved in it—such as the Kosovo war—were "external". As with Iraq and Turkey, the crisis in the Balkans, of which the Kosovo war was only the latest stage, is not external, but rather directly attributable to the actions of the Western powers. The United States and major West European countries sought to take advantage of the disintegration of the USSR at the start of the 1990s to establish their own interests—specifically, the domination of the capitalist market economy—across the countries of Eastern Europe previously closed off to them.

In the case of Yugoslavia, the imposition of International Monetary Fund austerity measures caused economic instability and breakdown. The former Stalinist bureaucrats—such as Milosevic in Serbia and Tudjman in Croatia—consciously sought to deflect the resulting social crisis into ethnic conflict. The imperialist powers further inflamed tensions among the Yugoslav republics by giving the green light to the secession of Croatia and Slovenia. From this point, the rapid dissolution of the Yugoslav federation was inevitable, setting into motion bitter civil war.

What has been the outcome? Some 1.1 million people displaced during the Bosnian war of 1992-95 remain refugees. Bosnia-Herzegovina has been divided into ethnic cantons, policed by thousands of Western troops. Unemployment, extreme poverty and high-level corruption are rampant.

The total number of refugees from the Kosovo crisis has now passed the 1 million mark. In addition to the ethnic Albanians driven out of the province by a combination of Serb military aggression and the NATO bombing, more than 200,000 Serbs and gypsies have been expelled by the Kosovo Liberation Army since NATO troops took up their positions in June.

In Kosovo and Serbia, entire industries have been laid to waste, depriving thousands of employment. Bridges and roads have been destroyed, energy and water supplies and communications systems damaged, homes, hospitals and schools bombed flat. In addition, pollution from munitions presents an enormous health risk. The use of depleted uranium (DU) weapons dropped by American planes on Kosovo during the war is likely to cause 10,000 fatal cancer cases, and as yet undetermined numbers of birth defects.

Just six months ago, the Kosovar refugees were assured of the protection of the "international community". Night and day the media kept up a constant stream of images of Kosovar Albanian families, sleeping in the open air, desperate and hungry and. Their plight was used to justify naked imperialist aggression against the Serbian people.

Wilfully ignoring the fact that their bombing campaign had greatly fuelled the refugee crisis, Europe's centre-left governments proclaimed that they were waging a new type of warfare—not for profit or self-interest, but for "humanitarian" purposes. The illusions generated by this can be seen in the numerous interviews with Kosovar refugees attempting to enter Britain, each tragically repeating that "Tony Blair was our friend during the war, he will help us now".

The claim of the European governments to be the Kosovars' protectors was always problematic. Halfway through the NATO war a row broke out on the Continent, after Germany insisted that other European countries take on greater responsibility for accommodating the ensuing refugees. Blair was finally forced to agree that the UK would take "up to 1,000 refugees" a week, but only when it seemed likely that Yugoslavia would have to capitulate after five weeks of constant bombing. Consequently, the vast bulk of these places were never filled. Amnesty International described Straw's recent claim that the UK had accepted some 10,000 refugees from Kosovo as "at best, disingenuous". Some 11,270 people from the former Yugoslavia applied for asylum in the UK between 1996 and 1998. A further 2,440 did so between January and March 1999. Yet in 1998, just 1,120 of them were given some form of leave to remain, and in 1999 it was just 22.

Most refugees from the former Yugoslavia are currently to be found in Europe's poorest country, Albania (430,000), and in Macedonia (200,000). This is equivalent to 13 percent of the local population of Albania and 11 percent of that of Macedonia. The third largest number is in Bosnia-Herzegovina.

Conditions in these countries are not much better than those the refugees have fled. A report by the International Monetary Fund on May 25, 1999, "The Economic Consequences of the Kosovo Crisis: An Updated Assessment", revealed the disastrous impact that the war has had on these neighbouring countries. It predicted that "even with adequate external financing the Kosovo crisis will have a major negative impact on growth in most of the six affected countries [Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Croatia, the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia (FYRM), and Romania]". Growth is expected to reduce on average by 3-4 percentage points, "with the impact sufficiently large in some countries to cause output to contract". Even this does not fully take into account "the less quantifiable impact of potential setbacks to structural reforms and deterioration in governance. Such setbacks could lead to broader instability in the short run in some countries, and to lower growth in the medium term". Concrete pledges of external aid "so far fall well short of what is required to fill balance of payments gaps in the six affected countries".

Official European Commission policy is to try and hold the refugees in these countries, and work for their "speedy repatriation". Unsurprisingly, this is not a proposition most of the refugees undertake voluntarily. Smuggling gangs, operating in Kosovo, the former Soviet Union or Iraq, are reported to conduct a lucrative trade running refugees into Europe. The going rate from Iraqi Kurdistan to Britain is £2,500, from Turkey £2,000 or less, and from Kosovo £1,000. Often the refugees are cheated and abandoned penniless at another point. Over the last weeks, several hundred Kosovar refugees—men, women and children—have been found wandering the Kent countryside in the early hours of the morning, having been dumped on the road. Those without money to pay the smugglers take more extreme measures, clinging to lorry axles or sealing themselves into haulage containers.

Having achieved their military ends, European officialdom's attitude towards those they once claimed to protect has turned decidedly ugly. In the space of a few months, Kosovar Albanians have gone from being a long-suffering people in need of help, to "frauds" manipulating the public's goodwill and stealing its money.

Official policy now is to chase asylum-seekers out of Europe by any means necessary.

Two months ago, the Italian government announced that it would treat those entering the country from Yugoslavia without visas as illegal immigrants, rather than refugees. The decision was taken after 2,000 Gypsies from Kosovo had arrived at Italian ports over the preceding month. Speaking for the Interior Ministry, Daniale Pugliese said that government could "no longer apply the terms of the humanitarian protection decree which was in force during the war". In Norway, refugees are being held in campgrounds and disused military bases, subsisting only on food and clothing rations until their cases are processed. In Germany, such is the series of hurdles introduced over the last period to deter asylum-seekers from entering the country that the number of refugees has fallen from 400,000 a year to less than 100,000. Last year it began expelling hundreds of thousands of refugees from the Bosnian war.

As the Blair government deliberated its next step, across the Channel the Socialist Party government of Lionel Jospin was carrying through its own crackdown against asylum-seekers in Calais. For weeks, hundreds of refugees—mainly from Kosovo, Albania and Iraq—had been camped out in makeshift plastic tents in the St. Pierre Park. Denied any financial assistance from the French authorities, the asylum-seekers were forced to rely on handouts and were subjected to regular harassment from the CRS riot police. According to a report in Britain's *Observer* newspaper, conditions were so bad that a baby, who had lived for six months in the park with his mother, died last month. Finally, the Calais local authority and the CRS cleared the park and demolished the shacks. The refugees were forcibly bussed to an abandoned brick factory, seven kilometres from the town centre, where they must remain—without heating or running water—until a decision is made on their case. Most, if not all, will be returned to the country they have fled.

Even as the Blair government rushed to get its new measures into place, other voices were demanding that it go even further. Their views were summed up by Peter Tompkins, head of the Immigration Service in 1981-91, in the letters page of the *Sunday Times*. The problem, he complained, was that the previous Conservative government had relaxed the policy of detaining asylum-seekers after a detention centre onboard a disused car ferry broke its moorings during the 1987 storm. Cynically he claims that there was "no risk to those on board", but "adverse publicity" meant that the "reforming element" in the immigration service held sway, and those on board the ferry were given temporary release. Straw should now revert to the previous policy and "open up former military establishments as detention centres, provide food, medical and legal advice but not offer detainees any financial awards or allow them to take employment. Inside 12 months our 'soft touch' image will disappear".



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