

British Labour government intensifies attacks on asylum-seekers

Tania Kent**17 December 1999**

Asylum-seekers in Britain are confronted with a barrage of new legislation and emergency measures by the Labour government attacking their democratic rights and promoting an atmosphere of hatred against them.

Emergency measures to disperse asylum-seekers around Britain came into effect last week, with the establishment of "clearing houses" in Kent and London to process newly arriving refugees. The dispersal plans have been cobbled together on the grounds that certain local authorities in the south are "overburdened" and lack the space to take any more refugees. The asylum-seekers will be mainly dispersed to the northwest and northeast of England.

These arrangements will stay in place until April 2000, when a new system for handling asylum-seekers is to be laid out in a new Asylum and Immigration Act. Around 6,500 asylum-seekers a month are expected to fall within the terms of the new system, including 1,300 families and 1,300 single adults.

Under the regulations, single people can be given financial support only as part of a package of accommodation and vouchers for essential needs, with each person receiving just £10 in cash per week. Those who turn down accommodation placements will be denied benefits. No asylum-seeker may spend more than seven consecutive days and nights away from the accommodation provided for them without permission.

New government regulations published the same week deemed that the cost of stationery, stamps, telephone calls and travel expenses are not part of the "essential living needs" of asylum-seekers, who must also meet the costs of pursuing claims for refugee status out of their allowances. Many asylum-seekers dispersed under the new rules could be situated miles from any legal advisor and a considerable distance from the

Immigration Department. They stand as well to lose access to translators and the support of their own community. Consequently this new regulation will create further obstacles to pursuing refugee status.

Refugee organisations have expressed alarm at the measures, stating they will lead to thousands of families with children being bussed north through the night to unknown destinations to be dumped on run-down public housing estates with few support facilities.

Original plans to give each region an agreed monthly quota have been abandoned, and the clearinghouses will instead rely on daily offers from each region to house the new asylum-seekers.

The government will also open a privately run internment camp near Cambridge in the New Year to hold 400 new asylum-seekers a week, while their claims are processed on a "fast track" basis. Those who have their applications rejected will be ordered to leave the country immediately.

The camp will be situated on the site of a former military barracks at Oakington. Asylum-seekers held there would not be allowed to leave the camp without permission. Those who do will be regarded as absconders and will be liable to arrest and detention in Campsfield, near Oxford, or at other secure detention centres. Currently, 800 asylum-seekers are held in detention centres at any one time. This number will increase by 50 percent with the opening of Oakington.

The latest statistics show that around 6,000 asylum-seekers arrived last October, with the largest numbers coming from Yugoslavia and Somalia. The backlog of those presently waiting for their claims to be dealt with now stands at 94,000.

The new measures can only escalate assaults against refugee communities and promote a climate of fear amongst them, as politicians and the press continue to

whip up racist hostility to immigrants who, they charge, are “flooding” Britain.



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