

European Union: restrictive asylum policy costs lives

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In July 1998, a lorry carrying 27 Kosovan refugees near the German-Czech border was involved in a serious accident. The collision occurred when the driver lost control of the vehicle at a curve in the road while attempting to avoid the Federal Border Guard (BGS). Seven of the Kosovan Albanians died as a result. The remaining passengers were injured, some seriously. The next day, the border police sought to move three of the surviving accident victims to the Czech Republic, two of whom were so badly injured that Czech officials were unwilling to receive them.

Such fatal accidents on the external borders of the European Union (EU) are not isolated cases. They are the consequence of the systematic “fortress EU” policy against “unwanted” refugees and migrants attempting to leave their homeland either on political and religious grounds, or because of dire poverty.

Replying to a parliamentary question from the Party of Democratic Socialism, the German government revealed that between February 1997 and October 1999, 42 people have died on Germany's borders. Four of these, three Germans and a Swiss national, died in circumstances unconnected with the border. The remaining 38 were refugees who died attempting to cross the border illegally. Most died by drowning, while others perished due to road accidents, hypothermia or heart failure.

One hundred and fifteen people were injured during the same period when crossing the frontier or as a result of the pursuit and use of force by the border police. They suffered hypothermia, bruises, abrasions, bites from tracker dogs, or were injured in road accidents.

So far as is known, the refugees' countries of origin include: Rumania, Yugoslavia, Iraq, the Czech Republic, Moldavia, Vietnam, Afghanistan, Sri Lanka, India, Senegal, Macedonia, Poland, the Slovak

Republic, Russia, Byelorussia, Ukraine, Turkey, Syria, Albania, Chile, the US, Bulgaria and Bangladesh.

While these figures are shocking enough, it is clear that they fall far short of the total numbers who are injured or die in the attempt to make an illegal border crossing. In compiling statistics, the German government does not include those who are washed up on the Polish banks of the Oder and Neisse Rivers, those who lose their lives on the Czech or Austrian side of the border or those killed coming to Germany by ship or plane.

Also not counted are the undoubted victims of this restrictive border policy who do not die in its immediate vicinity: deportees in detention centres who die from lack of medical attention or those who commit suicide due to fear of deportation. While he was being deported on May 28, 1999, 30-year-old Aamir Mohammed Ageeb, was killed by BGS officials who tied him up and pressed a motor bike helmet into his head. German statistics also fail to include those who commit suicide or are murdered after being deported, not to mention those refugees who are victims of racist violence inside Germany.

UNITED for Intercultural Action, a European network of anti-racist organisations, documents the fate of refugees who die trying to reach Western Europe. In the period from 1993 to August 1999 they registered 1,622 deaths, victims of the EU's border defences and its intensified asylum laws.

On the basis of the 1991 Schengen Agreement, the EU states have spared no cost or effort to close their borders to “unwanted” refugees and migrants. In particular, the EU's eastern borders with Poland, the Czech Republic and Slovenia have been subject to stiffer surveillance measures by Germany, Austria and Italy.

The “Iron Curtain”, considered by the West a symbol of inhumanity and oppression, has given way to a digital defence system, with governments pouring millions into its ever more elaborate construction. The Schengen Informations System (SIS) stores data about those who are turned back at the border, and thus considered “unwanted” or “dangerous” foreigners. This data is then exchanged between member countries. To uncover refugees, the EU's eastern borders have been equipped with detachments of tracker dogs. Jeeps, helicopters and speed boats are installed with high-tech devices such as infrared and night-sensitive cameras, seismographs, cavity location devices, and instruments for measuring carbon dioxide (to determine the presence of humans by detecting respiratory gases.).

While Austria uses troops to secure its borders against immigration, throughout the 1990s Germany developed the BGS into an all-powerful federal police force, able to carry out identity checks not only at state borders, but also in all railway stations and trains inside Germany. It is now empowered to enter dwellings “known to be used as meeting places of smugglers or persons without residence permits” and to undertake all forms of surveillance, ranging from telephone taps to planting listening bugs. These laws allow the BGS to override basic democratic rights.

The extension of surveillance and control systems, put into place in order to effect the “border security” of the EU, pose a danger to the entire population. By conjuring up threatening scenarios—either of gangs of organised crime and smugglers or openly racist claims of “floods of asylum-seekers”—politicians, with the support of the media, seek to gain acceptance for repressive measures of state control. The cross-border collection and exchange of data, eavesdropping and screening attack the democratic rights of all. The construction of a police state shows that the ruling circles understand very well that we live in a class society where social relations are being stretched to the limit.

Mamadou Diouk, the speaker of the national co-ordinating committee of *sans papiers* (those without valid residence permits) in France, commented: “The increasing zeal that European governments use to harass foreigners is a foretaste of the ‘social Europe’ that they are working on. Anyone who thinks that our struggle has nothing to do with them, because they

have the right papers, is mistaken. They fail to understand that what is now being practised on the *sans papiers*, is how to silence the most vulnerable citizens within European.”



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