

Norway intensifies persecution of asylum seekers

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Following a meeting between the Norwegian Ministry of Justice and the Aliens Directorate earlier this month, Norway is to withdraw the right to free legal aid for asylum seekers.

The authorities are ending the right to fair representation for refugee applicants on the spurious grounds that the latter do not require free legal aid until after they have been granted asylum. Free legal representation by a solicitor, fluent in the native language of the country where the asylum seeker wishes to reside in the future, is one of the few means of gaining a proper hearing. Those who cannot initially afford legal representation are clearly disadvantaged.

The Norwegian authorities have justified their measures by pointing to the fact that they are the last country in Europe where asylum seekers still have a legal right to a lawyer without incurring any costs. Removing this right will save \$2.4 million per year.

As many as 2,000 asylum seekers might be expelled from Norway when the Schengen treaty, removing inner-European border controls, comes into full effect in March 2001. This figure represents roughly 1 in 6 of all asylum seekers currently awaiting a decision on their future status, housed in Norwegian transit camps. A spokesman for the Justice Department stated that most of those expelled would be returned to Sweden, Germany or Denmark under the Schengen treaty's "first country of entry" provision, which makes refugees the responsibility of the country through which they first entered the EU. He added that Norway would continue to tighten up its policies concerning "aliens", especially regarding so-called criminal asylum seekers. Future infringement of the law by a prospective asylum seeker will carry greater penalties, a euphemism for rapid deportation. Greater co-ordination between the Nordic nations is expected to materialise in the near future,

making it even more difficult for those fleeing persecution to reach Europe.

At the end of last year, the Department of Justice announced fresh efforts to severely restrict the access of asylum seekers fleeing impoverished Iraq who wish to come to Norway. The Norwegian authorities are acting in conjunction with the UN High Commissioner for Refugees to return Kurdish asylum seekers to northern Iraq. Undersecretary of State Atle Hamar accused all those fleeing Iraq of abusing the right to asylum.

In October 1999, Norway rejected several hundred applications for asylum from Serbian refugees. Their applications were turned down on the grounds that Croatia gave former Serbian soldiers an amnesty from possible war crimes. A report by the Norwegian Association for Refugees (NOAS) showed that the Serbs were not only refused amnesty but may also have been sentenced wrongly for war crimes on their return.

The persecution of immigrants and asylum seekers has led to 900 of those in transit camps going missing last year. Most have gone into hiding because they fear that they will be expelled from Norway. Of those missing, 30 are children. The Norwegian press carried a story of a Serb family with four children who are hiding in the forest near to Hedmark, after they fled a camp in Finnskogen, close to the Swedish border.

Cuts to social services and in the teaching of Norwegian as a foreign language have contributed to a situation whereby refugees and immigrants are finding extreme difficulty assimilating into Norwegian society, according to the Trade Unions Research institute (FAFO).

The mainstream parties have legitimised draconian measures against refugees, saying this is a method of stemming support amongst the public for the extreme right wing. Instead it has only further emboldened

fascist elements. The leader of the Norwegian Confederation of Trade Unions, Yngve Haagensen, and its Youth Secretary, Mohammed Ahssain, both received death threats from fascists earlier this month.

The situation in Norway today is similar to that of Sweden and Denmark a couple of years ago, where fascists made death threats against immigrants and asylum seekers, trade unionists and socialists in the wake of the government's repressive measures against immigrants. Those threats have since rapidly escalated into bomb attacks, assaults and even murder.

The Norwegian Prime Minister Kjell Magne Bondevik recently criticised Austrian Freedom Party leader Joerg Haider, saying he hoped that Haider would be unable to influence Austrian government policy. At the same time, Bondevik's government is carrying out policies that would meet the approval of the Austrian right winger concerning the treatment of asylum seekers.



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