Algerian refugee commits suicide in Frankfurt airport's asylum zone

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On Saturday, May 6, 40-year-old asylum-seeker Naimah H. hung herself in a shower room of the transit accommodation facilities at Frankfurt-Main Airport. This Algerian woman had been held under arrest there for over seven months. The airport's transit area has the legal status of an extraterritorial zone. Refugees arriving by plane are held there to prevent them from entering upon “German territory”, and thus being able to fight more effectively for their asylum and right to stay in Germany.

Naimah H. had fled Algeria because her husband was being sought as a terrorist and she had herself been raped several times by the Algerian police.

Although Naimah H. succeeded in escaping from Algeria to Germany, her suffering was to find no end in this country. The Federal Office for Recognition of Foreign Refugees rejected her asylum application and, at the end of September, the Frankfurt Administration Court also dismissed her appeal as unworthy of credit.

Drawing on reports from the Protestant Regional Association of Frankfurt as well as the Catholic charity organisation Caritas—groups that aid refugees held in the prison-like conditions at Frankfurt airport—the *Frankfurter Rundschau* took an in-depth look into the tragic circumstances which drove Naimah H. to suicide.

After the failure of her claim to asylum, and because she lacked identity papers, Naimah H. endured months of waiting for the dreaded deportation back to Algeria. According to those who supported her, the woman had already suffered great hardship on arrival in Frankfurt in 1999. In February this year, social workers at the airport reported that she had cried hysterically for hours. On February 26 she collapsed for the first time and had to be taken to hospital. Shortly before, her lawyer Andreas Metzner had lodged an appeal with the Federal Ministry that Naimah H. be allowed to enter the country on humanitarian grounds. The appeal remained unanswered.

The official airport asylum procedure was introduced under the Kohl government and Interior Minister Kanther in 1993. It is one aspect of the so-called asylum compromise which limited the right of asylum to a point where it was barely recognisable. The regulations were only able to be enacted with the support of the SPD opposition, as a two-thirds majority in the federal parliament was necessary to curtail the constitutional right to asylum.

The airport asylum procedure was sharply criticised from the beginning by human rights and refugee organisations who demanded its abolition. According to the new law, the right to remain at the airport is valid for 19 days at most. In this time either the granting or the rejection of an asylum application is to be decided in a speedy procedure, which is not feasible. If a case has not been resolved after 19 days, the refugee should be allowed to enter the country. However, this part of the procedure in practice is not observed.

If the application procedure takes longer, or if immediate deportation is not possible for other reasons (such as the absence of identity papers), the refugee has to sign a so-called voluntary declaration by which longer detention within the airport premises is legally secured. This amounts to nothing but coercion. Nevertheless, many asylum-seekers give their signatures because otherwise they are threatened with incarceration in a prison for deportees.

After her asylum application had been rejected in September 1999, Naimah H. signed this controversial voluntary declaration. But, psychologically distraught, she had it legally revoked on February 29. She was subsequently placed in the Frankfurt-Preungesheim deportees prison.

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Her lawyer reports that, quite understandably, she was unable to bear conditions there either, and decided to sign the “voluntary declaration” for another period of detention at the airport. On May 4 officers of the Federal Border Protection squad delivered her back to the airport accommodation facilities, where she committed suicide two days later. Denied urgently needed psychological support and even the most basic human understanding, she had been unable to cope with the suffering she had experienced in Algeria.

The suicide of Naimah H. is the first suicide of a refugee at Frankfurt airport since the introduction of the highly disputed airport asylum procedure, but it is certainly not the first time someone there has tried to take his or her own life. Since 1997, 18 attempted suicides by refugees have been registered by church groups. According to the director of Caritas, this is the consequence of intolerable psychological stress brought about by the refugees' long-term detention. “Cramped living room, air traffic noise, absence of green spaces, inadequate separation of the sexes” is how the lawyer Metzner describes conditions in the transit area.

At the moment 42 refugees are living in the airport asylum zone. Ten of these individuals have been held for more than 100 days. A short time ago 30 refugees made a dramatic appeal to the Frankfurt section of Amnesty International, complaining of “inhumane and degrading conditions” and “lack of provision for fundamental human intimacies in our life in the transit zone”.

The refugee support organisation, Pro Asyl, has demanded an end to incarceration of prospective deportees—which sometimes lasts up to one and a half years—as well as abolition of the entire airport asylum procedure. But the response from the Red-Green coalition government has been the sentence: “The period of detention of deportees and the duration of the airport asylum procedure will be reviewed in light of their appropriateness to each individual case.” Even this principle is not being observed.

According to information provided by social workers at Frankfurt Airport, the number of refugees who were held for longer than 19 days at the airport constantly increased in the period from 1997 to 1999, when the Red-Green coalition was already in government. In 1999, 21 percent of asylum-seekers at the airport fell into this category, while in 1997 it had been 13 percent. In 1999, 33 refugees were detained for even longer than 100 days. In 1997 only two had suffered this fate.

Even children are not excepted from internment at the airport under such conditions—a situation which was criticised in a UNICEF study last August and which contravenes the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. The problem not only involves exceptional cases, but is a frequently occurring phenomenon. This was taken up in Christian Wagner's television drama “Ten Crazy Days”, which was broadcast by the French-German cultural TV channel *Arte* on May 12.

In a commentary on May 12, the *Frankfurter Rundschau* declared: “For asylum-seekers the airport remains what it was under (former CDU minister Manfred) Kanther: an internment camp at the portal of the Republic; on the fringe of legality. It is a place which makes people ill and—as is apparent from the case of Naimah H.—drives them to suicide.”

In view of the performance of the SPD-Green government in relation to asylum politics, there is little chance that the first suicide in the transit zone will lead to changes, aiming to deter such incidents. Federal Minister Otto Schily (SPD) and the German authorities dealing with foreigners have shown and will show no mercy: either in this affair, or in other issues of human suffering or questionable policy associated with the rights of refugees and foreigners.

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