

# British Home Secretary campaigns to overturn Geneva Convention on asylum

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23 June 2000

Britain's Home Secretary Jack Straw is currently campaigning amongst international leaders to overturn the 1951 Geneva Convention on Refugees, which guarantees the right to asylum. His proposals are said to have won support from social democratic heads of government gathered earlier this week at a European Union (EU) summit in Portugal. During the meeting, Straw cynically seized upon the terrible deaths of 58 Chinese immigrants—found suffocated in the back of an airtight lorry at Dover port—to reiterate his demand for change.

Straw has described the Convention as “out of date.” At a debate, *Is Britain's asylum policy fair?*, sponsored by the *Observer* newspaper in London recently, Straw said that his intention was to place asylum law on a “more rational basis”. Speaking alongside Conservative spokeswoman Anne Widdecombe and right-wing journalist Peter Hitchens, Straw claimed that his measures would be “fairer”. Asylum-seekers would no longer be prey to “people traffickers”, charging extortionate prices to smuggle migrants into Britain, he said.

Straw set out his proposals in a speech before the European Conference on Asylum in Lisbon last Friday. He claimed that the “essential contradiction” at the heart of the 1951 convention was that, whilst setting out an individual's right to asylum, it does not oblige any particular country to admit him or her. The result is that “genuine” refugees often have to enter a country illegally before they can lodge their claim to asylum, he said.

Straw has proposed a new scheme, which involves setting up an internationally agreed list of “safe countries” from which Britain and other European countries would not accept asylum claims.

Those fleeing countries internationally recognised for

severe human rights abuses would have to lodge their claim in their home country (!) or a neighbouring state. Provided the country met the agreed criteria, the applicant would be extended temporary protection under an international quota system. The applicant would have to prove that they faced a “clear cut case of persecution”.

The Home Secretary argues that the change would mean host countries would not have to fund the cost of supporting asylum-seekers whilst their claim was being processed. Those leaving countries deemed to be “safe”, however, would almost certainly not have their claims even assessed.

Straw's measures represent a fundamental attack on civil liberties. The Geneva Convention guarantees the right to asylum, without conditions. Drawn up during the Cold War, many of its Western signatories regarded the Convention as another means of prosecuting their economic and political struggle against the Soviet Union and Eastern bloc countries. (The US amended its immigration policy in 1965 to guarantee refugee status to any one coming from an Eastern European country). Two years later, the Convention was extended beyond its original geographical limitations, so as to apply to anyone who was forced to leave their country “as a result of a well founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion”.

The collapse of the Stalinist-ruled states, however, has removed the Convention's propaganda value. More fundamentally, the drive toward capitalist restoration in the former Soviet Union and Eastern Europe has unleashed a social catastrophe in these countries, helping to fuel rising levels of poverty and political instability across the world. Many are so desperate to escape the increasingly harsh conditions they face that

up to one million people are in the process of seeking entry to Western countries at any one time, according to Home Office estimates.

The response of the US and the EU has been to firmly bolt the door shut. Asylum-seekers are routinely described as “bogus”, with those trying to escape an impoverished existence derided as “parasites” and “economic migrants”. It is these measures that have forced many immigrants to turn to criminal gangs and traffickers in an attempt to enter Western countries, often at the cost of their lives.

Previous Conservative governments in the UK have sought to undermine the Convention by adding national “protocols” and amendments that subverted its provisions. The Blair Labour government now proposes to overturn the right to asylum altogether.

Amnesty International spokeswoman Kate Allen explained that Straw's proposals turned the “the Refugee Convention on its head by making it into a charter for governments to bar asylum seekers, rather than for asylum seekers to seek refuge.” Under Straw's proposals, asylum claims from many places would be routinely dismissed, because they were deemed to be living in a “safe” country. Those attempting to escape countries recognised for “severe” human rights abuses would not only be forced to remain under these conditions in order to qualify, but would also have to openly declare their intention to leave—greatly increasing the risk of persecution, detention, torture and even murder.



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