

58 Chinese migrants found dead in lorry at Dover, Britain

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The tragic deaths of 58 Chinese people, found in the back of a lorry early on Monday, highlight the desperate situation facing asylum-seekers and refugees.

The bodies of fifty-four men and four women were discovered in an airtight 18 metre-long container at the port of Dover. The driver of the Dutch-registered lorry had just made the crossing from Zeebrugge, Belgium, when his vehicle was pulled over for inspection by a customs official.

According to reports, when the container doors were opened a scene “out of a nightmare” confronted the officer. Warm and putrid smelling air rushed out. Two men lay by the doors, gasping for breath. Behind them were 58 bodies lying sprawled between crates of tomatoes. Officials who entered the container are receiving counselling.

It is likely that the 58 died of asphyxiation, although there is a possibility of carbon monoxide poisoning. It is believed that the 60 people had been trapped inside the container for more than 18 hours. Electricity to the refrigeration unit had been turned off throughout the journey, during summer temperatures of up to 32C (90F).

The two survivors were taken to hospital suffering from extreme dehydration. A hospital spokesman said, “I think the psychological torment will stay with them for the rest of their lives.” Speaking through a translator, the survivors described how the trapped passengers had tried to raise the alarm in Zeebrugge, screaming and banging on the locked doors, but no one could hear their cries.

The lorry driver has been arrested and police are attempting to establish who is behind the Dutch haulage company, Van Der Spek Transporten, which was registered only five days ago.

The 60 are believed to have travelled from the

southern Chinese province of Fujian on the Taiwan Strait. They are only a handful of the tens of thousands that flee China each year, seeking escape from grinding poverty and oppression. Britain has the largest Chinese population in Europe, and the number of those applying for asylum from China has more than doubled recently, to 500 per month. Those found suffocated to death at Dover would have paid up to \$30,000 to get to Britain. Most would have only been able to raise a deposit and would be forced to pay off the rest by working as virtual slave labour in restaurants and sweatshops, or as prostitutes.

The response of Britain's Labour government to the tragedy at Dover, one echoed by the world's media, has been to treat it essentially as a policing issue. Prime Minister Tony Blair and Home Secretary Jack Straw have denounced the spread of trafficking in asylum-seekers and refugees by criminal gangs as, in Straw's words, a “profoundly evil trade”.

While this form of commerce is undeniably among the most abhorrent forms of criminal activity, it is both disingenuous and self-serving for the British authorities, and their counterparts in the rest of Europe and North America, to act as though they had no responsibility for its proliferation. From the sanctimonious statements of Blair and the reports in the mass media, one could hardly guess that the policies pursued by Western governments have directly contributed to the rapid rise in the number of refugees, and their increasingly brutal treatment by governments around the world. There is, in fact, an intimate connection between the policies of the British Labour government and the tragic deaths of the 58 Chinese asylum-seekers.

Earlier this year, the Blair government passed some of the most restrictive and anti-democratic asylum and

immigration legislation in the world. The Asylum and Immigration Act introduced "fast-track" procedures to speed up deportations and replaced cash benefits payable to asylum-seekers with vouchers. Asylum seekers are repeatedly denounced as "bogus" and scapegoated by the government and the media, often in racist terms, in order to divert attention from the impact of welfare cuts on working people.

Britain currently rejects 95 percent of all asylum applications from China. The two survivors of the Dover tragedy will almost certainly be deported—and have already been moved out of hospital to a police station for questioning.

The Labour government is, moreover, demanding changes to the 1951 United Nations Convention on Refugees that would drastically curtail the right of asylum. Straw wants only those applying for asylum *before* they leave their country of origin—and only from countries internationally condemned for severe human rights abuses—to be eligible. The proposal is said to have the support of many of Europe's governments.

It is already virtually impossible for refugees and asylum-seekers to enter Europe legally. The European Union (EU) has scaled back the number of countries it recognises for asylum. Heavy fines are imposed on airlines, shippers and trucking companies found to be carrying stowaways, whilst border controls have been stepped up.

Even as EU leaders meeting for a summit in Portugal this week expressed their "sadness" at the 58 deaths, they promised even harsher anti-immigrant measures. In a joint statement they pledged that the 15 EU countries would step up cooperation over immigration and asylum.

The situation is no different in the US, once the favoured destination of Chinese migrants. In January this year America deported 246 stowaways back to the Fujian province as part of a clamp-down.

The Beijing government has for years pursued the rapid development of private industry and the dismantling of state enterprises and social provisions, at a terrible social cost to China's workers and peasants. A similar situation faces millions of working people in Eastern Europe, the second largest departure point for migration to Western Europe.

Europe and America have both insisted on the implementation of these market reforms and turned a

blind eye to the abuses of democratic rights that have accompanied it. Yet when the victims of these policies seek refuge from their travails, they invariably meet with rejection and vilification as "economic refugees", unworthy of asylum status.



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