

France seeks to block asylum for over 900 Kurdish "boat people"

Richard Tyler
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The French government is trying to avoid granting asylum to 908 Kurdish refugees, whose ship ran aground on the Côte d'Azur last Saturday.

The refugees, who had fled from Iraq, had been at sea for eight days in the Mediterranean after leaving Turkey aboard a Cambodian-registered bulk carrier, the *East Sea*. Conditions on the ship, itself little more than a rust bucket, were very bad. French doctor Jean-Jacques Raymond, one of the first people to go aboard the stranded vessel, said he was surprised no one had died on the voyage, "People were lying on wooden palettes, others were huddled together in the dark, children were crying".

All the Kurdish refugees, including over 300 children under 10 years old, were crammed into the hold without any proper facilities. The crew, who wore balaclavas to conceal their identities, threw down food, but after three or four days the water they had ran out and conditions became extremely unsanitary. Any complaints were met with threats to throw them into the sea. The crew woke them up a few hours before the ship was run aground and told them to "get prepared, you have almost arrived". When the ship was beached, the crew disappeared into the night.

The *East Sea* arrived on the shores of France just as American and British planes had concluded their bombing of Baghdad, on the grounds of enforcing the no-fly zone set up in northern and southern Iraq. The northern no-fly zone was established ostensibly to prevent Saddam Hussein's forces threatening Iraq's Kurdish minority in the "safe havens" set up by the US, Britain and France following the end of the 1991 Gulf War.

The xenophobic and anti-immigrant response of the French political establishment to the arrival of a boatload of Iraqi-Kurdish refugees again exposed such

hypocritical professions of humanitarian concern. From across the spectrum of official politics, spokesmen opposed granting the fleeing Kurds refugee status, on the grounds that this would encourage human trafficking. But like the other European governments, Paris is determined to clamp down on all immigration.

A spokesman for the ruling Socialist Party, Vincent Peillon, rejected granting the Kurds refugee status *en bloc*, saying "this would create an unfortunate precedent, with nobody able to control the results".

Prime Minister Lionel Jospin said his government would look at each case individually, but did not want to give a "bonus" to the illegal immigration rackets. Foreign Minister Hubert Védrine said, "Neither I nor anyone else thinks that it is feasible to send them back home to Syria or Iraq. But one cannot hold out the prospect of being integrated in France just because some crafty traffickers have pulled off this operation."

"Nothing should be done which primes the pump," he added.

Interior Minister Daniel Vaillant said the rules have to be obeyed, and that each of the Kurds individually would have to "show they are a political refugee".

Health Minister Bernard Kouchner, (formerly the UN High Representative in Bosnia), said Europe's "frontier defences will have to be reinforced", but this would still be insufficient to stop "economic migrants." Echoing similar calls from Britain's Home Secretary Jack Straw, Kouchner said the Geneva Convention would have to be "renegotiated".

Gaullist leader Charles Pasqua said it "was necessary to check if they are economic or political refugees... if they are economic refugees, it is obvious that we cannot keep them". If they were allowed to stay in France, "the floodgates will open", Pasqua said. Likening Europe's borders to a "sieve", he said France needed to

follow the example of England and Italy and become “harder” on immigration issues. “Tony Blair... preserved control over the management of immigration. We gave it up to the EU.”

“There is a problem of responsibility, and the responsibility of a state is not to accommodate all the world's misery”.

The French authorities took the Kurds to a military camp in nearby Frejus. This was immediately declared to be a “*zone d'attente*”, or extra territorial zone of detention, where they are being held pending any decision on their status as refugees.

On Monday morning, about 150 of the Kurdish refugees held a demonstration to protest against the poor conditions they were being held under. They organised a sit-in at the camp gates, preventing traffic entering or leaving for 45 minutes. Their main demand was to be recognised as political refugees. They also complained about the cold conditions they were being kept in and the inadequate feeding arrangements, only receiving their first hot meal on Monday. They also wanted to be able to move freely, and said the conditions in the camp made them feel like they were in prison.

Simone Long, vice president of the French Red Cross denied the refugees were cold and hungry, saying dismissively they “should not exaggerate. They should respect the people who have taken them in.”

In contrast, there were displays of spontaneous solidarity from local people, who quickly collected clothing and toys for the children.

French police said the Iraqi and Turkish Mafia had organised the ship, and stood to have made some £2 million. The Kurds were charged between \$2,000 and \$4,000 per adult and between \$1,000-1,500 per child for a place on the ship.

Most of those aboard were reasonably well off peasant farmers from Mossul, an area under the control of Iraq. According to one of the refugees, it was not poverty that had forced them to flee, “our farm was prosperous. Our sheep and products sold well, especially given the embargo. If we had not been persecuted we would not have left Iraq.”

One family had sold all their possessions to finance the trip. Abdallah, a father of six, said he had thought long and hard before deciding to undertake the dangerous journey away from the daily menace in Iraq.

He had paid to be taken to Italy, intending to travel onward to Germany to join relatives there.

This latest case comes amidst a simmering row between France and Britain about immigrants who use the Channel Tunnel to enter the UK. According to British officials, up to 400 illegal immigrants a month leave Paris with tickets for Calais, but then stay on the train until it reaches London. Of all the 15 European Union (EU) member states, Germany and Britain have the largest concentration of Kurdish refugees.

In 2000, nearly 400,000 applications for asylum were lodged throughout the EU, mostly from Yugoslavia and Afghanistan. However in 1999, the last year for which figures are available, only 25 percent of asylum applications in the EU were successful.

Most of those seeking refuge in the EU travel by sea or land, with a far smaller number coming by air. Such journeys, organised by criminal gangs who run the human trafficking rackets, are often extremely perilous and over 400 refugees are estimated to have died in European waters since 1996 trying to reach safety.



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