

Scotland: Asylum seekers hounded and beaten

Steve James
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In the last months, a series of brutal attacks have left many refugees from the Middle East and the Balkans desperate to leave Glasgow.

Asylum seekers sent to live on some of the city's bleakest housing estates under the Labour government's "dispersal" policy have been subject to stoning, vicious beatings, and sustained racist abuse. According to official statistics, the rate of attacks on asylum seekers is escalating at the rate of 170 percent each month.

The Glasgow Asylum Rights Campaign, established last spring, reports, "Asylum seeker children and adults, including the elderly and disabled, have been attacked with baseball bats, sticks, stones, rocks, bricks, and stabbed with knives, broken glass. Concrete blocks have been thrown on them from high windows. They have been threatened and chased on their way to school, church, and shops. Hair has been torn from their heads, they have been flung to the ground and kicked, and women have experienced sexual assaults, and repeatedly threatened with rape. Doors have been kicked in and excrement thrown through letterbox slots. Death threats have been made in person and written prominently on walls, close doors and landings. Graffiti also identifies which flats within a building house asylum seekers with profane language and incitement to violence."

On the Sighthill estate on April 21, three Palestinian brothers, Iyad, Haitham and Ziad Saada, were attacked by a mob of up to 40 people wielding glass bottles and baseball bats. Reports alleged that police looked on during the assault. Iyad and Haitham were left hospitalised, Haitham with broken ribs, a broken jaw, eye and facial injuries, Iyad with facial injuries and a damaged ear. Haitham had previously been severely injured by an Israeli armed forces raid in south Lebanon in which his wife was killed.

Last week, three Sudanese refugees were attacked by a gang of 10 youths. One refugee had a bottle smashed in his face and required hospital treatment.

While leafleting by the fascist British National Party and a group calling itself the Scottish National Front has been reported, the primary responsibility for the racist violence and official indifference rests with the Labour Party, the Conservatives and the media. In addition to Tory and Labour attempts to prove which is "toughest" on immigration, the Scottish press has led a vicious campaign against asylum seekers. In March last year, the Murdoch-owned *Scottish Sun* headlined its front page, "Lorry-loads of scroungers head for Britain to milk the system". In February this year, the *Evening Times* claimed that there were "gangs of refugees begging in the streets of Glasgow and reports of asylum seekers stealing from homes across Scotland."

Physical violence is only one aspect of the brutal treatment being handed out to asylum seekers, with 15,000 expected to be dispersed to Scotland before the end of the year—7,000 in Glasgow, and the rest to Edinburgh, Dundee and Aberdeen. Most asylum seekers are being lodged in hard-to-let accommodation in the most run down, drug ridden estates, where they receive little if any support from the local authority. They are barred from working for the first six months of their asylum claim, and under regulations brought in by Labour, asylum seekers no longer receive the same cash benefits as other welfare recipients, but must make do with a smaller amount paid in the form of food tokens. Although it is not unusual for refugees to have university-level qualifications, many only find employment in menial and extremely low paid jobs such as leafleting or cleaning once the six-month work ban expires.

Last year, the principal organisation responsible for

organising legal support for refugees—the Scottish Refugee Council (SRC)—earned condemnation from its own members after it dropped all criticism of the government's euphemistically named National Asylum Support Service. In February this year, the SRC closed its "one stop" shop in Glasgow, where six case workers had struggled to deal with up to 150 asylum seekers each day, to focus its efforts on emergency outreach work in the areas where asylum seekers had been dispersed.

The Labour led city council's approach has been one of complete indifference. A Glasgow doctor told the press that the failure of the council-run interpreting service meant asylum seekers among his patients were being put at risk and subjected to needless distress. Dr Peter von Kaehne, a general practitioner at Fernbank Medical Centre, Sighthill, complained bitterly that Glasgow Interpreting Service repeatedly made late cancellations to appointments, or failed to appear at all after some asylum-seekers had waited for more than a week to see a doctor.

Only when faced with the latest wave of racist attacks has Glasgow City Council attempted to “integrate” the hundreds of asylum seekers into the local community, which itself suffers high rates of deprivation after years of neglect and poor amenities. The council's efforts amounted to issuing a leaflet and organising a public meeting in the Sighthill area.

Attention has also been drawn to the 29-storey Red Road YMCA hostel in Springburn, where 150 single male refugees have been dumped in what has effectively been turned into an unofficial detention centre. Asylum seekers have complained that the building management were discriminating against them, keeping them on a minimal diet of cornflakes and tomatoes, and —preventing them from having visitors.



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