

Germany and Albania sign deportation agreement

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On November 18, German Minister of the Interior Otto Schily (German Social Democratic Party—SPD) and his Albanian counterpart Luan Rama came to an agreement which will enable Germany to deport Albanians as well as people who have come to Germany via Albania without a valid residence permit.

At this moment about 1,700 people living in Germany will be affected by this agreement and face the threat of immediate deportation. But with Albania being both one of the poorest countries in Europe and an important transit country for refugees coming from Eastern Europe, Russia and Asia, far more people stand to be affected by the agreement.

The agreement is reasoned to be necessary to combat international trade and trafficking in human beings. What is not taken into consideration in this context is the fact that watertight European borders, which make it virtually impossible for refugees to legally enter Europe, have created the preconditions for this kind of crime.

Interior Minister Schily called the agreement “an important contribution to combating illegal immigration from the Balkan-Region”. He stressed that not only the legal position, but also its translation into practice will be important. “We must be capable of carrying out measures aimed at preventing people taking up residence,” he said.

The agreement with Albania follows a similar agreement with Yugoslavia, signed on September 16, directly before the German elections. A previous agreement with Yugoslavia concluded in 1996 was suspended because of the embargo of Slobodan Milosevic’s government.

The agreement with Yugoslavia not only affects Yugoslav citizens but also so-called citizens of “a third state” and stateless persons. The agreement envisages

that Yugoslavia absorb these people or ensure that they are “forcibly transferred” to other countries. According to the minister of the interior, this not only applies to refugees coming from Kosovo but also about 50,000 Serbs and Montenegrins currently staying in Germany without proper long-term residency permits.

Many thousands of Sinti and Romany, as well as members of other ethnic minorities, are also affected. Many have been living in Germany for years, have children who were born and have grown up in Germany and are attending German schools. It is well known that the situation of Sinti and Romany in the Balkans has worsened considerably following the recent wars which exacerbated social problems and resulted in widespread impoverishment.

Following the first deportations from the state of North Rhine-Westphalia at the beginning of summer, hundreds of Romanies protested for weeks in various cities, including the state’s main city, Düsseldorf. Directly after German national elections in September they planned to go to the party congresses of the Green Party and the SPD in Bremen and Berlin to protest against the threatening deportations and for a permanent right of residence in Germany. They were prevented from doing so by the police, who justified their measures by arguing that they were not allowed to leave North Rhine-Westphalia according to laws governing refugees.

Restrictive asylum policies introduced by the SPD-Green government, combined with measures already introduced by the preceding conservative government of Helmut Kohl, have resulted in a drastic decline in the number of asylum-seekers entering Germany. Although the problems forcing foreigners to seek refuge—political persecution, war, civil war and extreme poverty—have multiplied, the hurdles preventing travel, entry and

application for asylum have intensified enormously.

At the beginning of September the refugee relief agency of the United Nations declared that the number of people applying for asylum in Germany had declined at an above-average rate. In the first half of 2002, the number of applications for asylum in the European Union decreased by 9 percent compared to the figure for the second half of 2001. In the same period of time the number of applications in Germany decreased by 24 percent. Between January and June 2002 around 36,000 people applied for asylum in Germany, 11,000 less refugees than in the previous half year.

The number of those who are actually accepted as asylum-seekers has declined even more dramatically. The refugee relief agency "Pro Asyl" released figures at the beginning of October which pointed to the "beginning of an ice age" for asylum-seekers in Germany. In 2001 every fifth applicant (20 percent) was accepted. In the first eight months of 2002 this number had fallen to just 6 percent!

This dramatic decline is a direct result of political decisions made by the German government as well as pressure placed on refugees by the minister for migration and refugees. Reports issued by the ministry of foreign affairs, led by Joschka Fischer (Green Party), have contributed to this development. They proceed from the assumption that in most countries from which refugees originate there exists a possibility of asylum somewhere within the country itself.

Despite advanced preparations by the American government for war against Iraq, for example, both the German ministry of the interior and ministry for foreign affairs claim that possibilities for seeking refuge within Iraq exist (for example, for Iraqi Kurds in northern Iraq). It is on this basis that discussions are taking place on whether or not to deport Iraqis to this region. Germany is currently the first preference for the majority of Iraqi asylum-seekers and in August, 910 Iraqis applied for asylum. Their chance of being accepted is practically zero.

Until now the deportation of refugees coming from Iraq has been stymied by Turkey's refusal to permit deportation through its territory. Discussion about building refugee camps in the region in the event of a war against Iraq has been going on for months, with the clear aim of preventing more refugees coming into the European Union and Germany.



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