

Britain: Government and media conspire to whip-up anti-immigrant hysteria

Richard Tyler
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The British government's belligerent drive to war against Iraq is being accompanied by a filthy campaign directed against immigrants and refugees, aided and abetted by the right-wing press. Its aim is to create a climate of fear and mistrust, in order to reinforce the claim that the so-called war against terrorism is the greatest threat to people's safety and justifies Britain's support for the planned decimation of Baghdad.

For weeks, tabloid newssheets such as the *Sun*, *Express* and *Mail* have been running virulently xenophobic articles, some bordering on overt racism. One particularly odious editorial in Rupert Murdoch's *Sun* described asylum seekers as a "sea of humanity ... polluted with terrorism and disease" that "threatens our way of life".

The article concludes by demanding, "Revoke the human rights law NOW and lock up all the illegals NOW" (emphasis in the original). The *Sun* claims to have received 230,000 petitions from readers who support its demands, and duly delivered them to No. 10 Downing Street, the Prime Minister's office.

Political editor Trevor Kavanagh fulminated against "the colonisation of this country by people with no right to the sanctuary they claim," saying refugee laws had been "hijacked by parasites".

So hysterical has been the coverage that some experts felt moved to answer charges that refugees and immigrants were "importing diseases". Vivienne Nathason, head of ethics at the British Medical Association, said many of them faced serious risks to their health *after* coming to Britain and being forced to live on the breadline. Dr John Coakley, medical director at the Homerton Hospital in London, said, "There is a lot of evidence to suggest that diseases such as TB are actually acquired here due to deprivation and overcrowding."

The Refugee Council also pointed out that the media claim that refugee populations were a hotbed of terrorism is contradicted by all available evidence. Out of 80,000 asylum seekers who came to Britain last year, only three were being held in connection with terrorist offences.

Knowing that any war in the Gulf will unleash a stream of refugees, the government is proposing to set up a series of "regional protection areas" to prevent them reaching Britain.

On February 5, the *Guardian* newspaper reported the existence of a cabinet paper containing a plan to establish United Nations "protection areas" where refugees could be held, and so preventing them travelling to Europe or other Western countries.

An official spokesperson for Prime Minister Tony Blair has admitted the veracity of press reports of the leaked document, saying, "This is a complex issue and it is only right that we look at a range of options."

The confidential paper, given a "restricted" classification, is the work of a joint Cabinet Office-Home Office policy committee. It describes the military cantonments as part of a "new global asylum system". The document suggests Iraqi refugees could be detained in camps established in Turkey, Iran and Iraqi Kurdistan. Elsewhere, northern Somalia could be used as a base for those fleeing the south of the country; Algerians could be held in Moroccan camps, and Ukraine/Russia used to hold those seeking asylum from the east of the soon to be enlarged European Union.

The paper could have emanated from George Orwell's Ministry of Truth, with its description of the plan to build massive encampments, policed by UN soldiers, as part of the "new vision for refugees".

Not only would the Western powers, under the guise

of the UN, police the “protection areas”, but military force could be used to stem the “flow” of refugees coming from other countries. While “any coercive intervention in other states is of course controversial,” the paper states, military action could be used as a “last resort”.

Another benefit of this “new vision” in the eyes of the Blair government would be to “rapidly reduce the number of economic immigrants”, that is those who seek relief from the grinding poverty the IMF and World Bank imposes on the so-called “under developed” countries.

Desperately seeking to revive their flagging electoral fortunes, the opposition Conservative Party is also seeking to garner support by playing the anti-refugee card. They are calling for all newly arrived asylum seekers to be locked up while they are investigated by the security services to see if they have terrorist links. Like Labour, they also support the renegotiation of the Geneva Convention, but would also consider unilateral withdrawal to create “a fairer and more humane system”.

The leader of the Church of England, Archbishop of Canterbury Dr Rowan Williams, agreed with this proposal in a recent *Sunday Times* interview, suggesting all asylum seekers should be locked up while their applications were processed.

According to an article in the *Observer*, “Ministers, aware that in Denmark, Holland and France the asylum issue has been fundamental to left-of-centre governments losing office, are anxious not to let the Conservatives get any purchase on the debate.” So a reactionary spiral unwinds: every time New Labour announces a crackdown on refugees, the right-wing press and the Conservatives shout “too little, too late!” and demand even harsher measures.

The Blair government has already abrogated Article Five of the Geneva Convention, so that it can detain without trial those refugees it claims have terrorist links. New Labour is seeking further revisions to the 1951 Convention, and Blair himself raised the possibility of Britain withdrawing from the European Convention on Human Rights.

Labour has tried to portray its anti-immigrant campaign as a response to public concern and even as a means of pulling the rug from under the far right. However, their every utterance is designed to inflame

fears and tensions and give succour to the fascists. In January, Home Secretary David Blunkett spoke of an asylum “backlash”. In an interview in the *New Statesman* magazine he said, “I’m worried about people taking the law into their own hands,” and described Britain as “a society like a coiled spring”.

The same month, the far-right British National Party secured another local councillor, overturning a Labour majority in the Mixenden ward in the West Yorkshire town of Halifax. The BNP won by 28 votes on a recount, bringing them their fifth council seat, after winning four seats in neighbouring Lancashire last year. The party is actively campaigning against government plans for the dispersal of asylum seekers to various northern towns in order to consolidate its recent gains.

New figures published on February 6, show that race-hate crimes have increased by 20 percent over the last 12 months. According to the report, the Crown Prosecution Service dealt with 3,728 cases, mainly involving racist attacks or vandalism. Nearly a third of all reported incidents are dropped before reaching the courts. Presenting the report, Attorney General Lord Goldsmith said, “The level of retractions by witnesses is very high because of intimidation or the fear of reprisals.”

While amassing in the Gulf the largest military force mobilised by Britain since World War II, the full force of the state is also being unleashed against those who seek a safe haven in the UK as a result of this neo-colonialist policy. Blair’s “new vision for refugees” is to detain them in heavily policed encampments, as far from Britain’s shores as possible. Those that still somehow manage to make the perilous journey from their war-torn or impoverished homelands to the UK will be treated as pariahs.



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