

Britain: Iranian refugee mutilates himself to protest conditions facing asylum seekers

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A 33-year-old Iranian Kurdish refugee who had sown up his eyes, ears and mouth in protest at Home Office efforts to overturn his successful application for asylum, is continuing to refuse food, despite learning that the government has lost its challenge.

Abas Amini was granted asylum three weeks ago as a fugitive from torture, but the Home Office had appealed against the ruling due to its own failure to have a representative present during the original hearing.

On hearing of the challenge last week, Abas, who lives in lodgings in Nottingham, north England, stitched up his eyes, ears and mouth and began a hunger strike. He has threatened to burn himself to death if anyone attempts to force-feed him.

With unusual speed, the independent appeals tribunal announced Wednesday May 28 that the government had been refused leave to appeal against his asylum claim but Abas has insisted he will continue his protest on behalf of other refugees.

Abas fled jail in Iran two years ago. A well-known poet in his homeland and a member of the Worker-Communist Party of Iran, he had joined rebels in Iranian Kurdistan at a young age and has spent seven years in jail. Escaping imprisonment, Abas left his wife and two sons, aged three and five, to make the long journey to Britain.

Arriving in August 2001, he applied for asylum and was subjected to a lengthy process in which his tribunal had to be adjourned on five separate occasions—three times because he was not provided with an appropriate translator. He was also left without financial assistance for six months due to a mix-up.

Doctors at the Medical Foundation for the Care of Victims of Torture backed Abas's application for asylum, describing how they had found scars consistent

with kickings and beatings on his body and how he had been "very psychologically damaged".

Abas has refused painkillers and antibiotics for an eye infection caused by the stitches and doctors have warned that his condition could become critical within days.

Doctor Chris Udenze who has visited Abas said that he was weak and dehydrated as a consequence of not drinking for several days. "He is quite clear that he actually wants to die," Udenze said.

He rejected that Abas should be force-fed under the mental health act. Although he had experienced severe psychological trauma and was depressed about his current situation, Abas's decision to begin hunger strike and sew his eyes and mouth had been made rationally, the doctor continued: "Mentally he is still quite alert... he is quite clear about what he is doing and what the consequences are."

Despite his sewn lips, Abas said: "I spent many years in prison being tortured. I was forced to flee here. Shouldn't a human being have a square foot of earth to live on to live in peace? I don't know what I have to do any more for my situation to be resolved so I can live like a human being."

Following news that his right to asylum had been upheld, Abas reaffirmed his willingness to die to highlight the conditions facing refugees across the world. In a principled statement, he told the media, "I said from the beginning that this was not just my problem. What is the difference between me and other asylum seekers who are facing desperation? Why is it that nobody listens until people have to commit suicide?"

Accusing the British authorities of betraying refugees, Abas said that news of his own success had only brought him sadness. "If all asylum seekers facing

the same dilemma had received a positive response or decision then that would have made me happy”.

Abas’s protest is believed to be the first of its kind in the UK, although hunger strikes have been held at several detention centres. It mirrors protests by asylum seekers in Australia last year who stitched their lips together in protest at their treatment by the authorities.

His action has helped throw the spotlight on the terrible conditions faced by many refugees, in contrast to campaigns by the media and right-wing parties painting asylum seekers as nothing more than criminals and a drain on vital national resources.

Speaking at the annual conference of the Association of Chief Police Officers earlier this month, President Chris Fox claimed that criminals were fraudulently claiming asylum and that immigrants were responsible for a sharp increase in human trafficking, prostitution and drug dealing.

In an unprecedented intervention that recalled Conservative Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher’s claim during the 1980s of Britain being “swamped” by immigrants, Fox had said that Britain is “a small island. We have some very, very intensely-populated areas and I think we have to be careful just how we let the mix develop.”

In an effort to further curry favour with the anti-immigrant lobby, the Blair government had boasted that it was “now on track” to halve the number of people claiming asylum by September.

Prime Minister Tony Blair said that Home Office figures showed a 32 percent fall in the number of people applying for asylum in Britain in the first three months of this year, down from 23,000 to 16,000.

The government’s “relentless focus” had been on “cutting the number of asylum applications”, down by more than 45 percent since last year, the prime minister claimed, and quickly deporting those whose applications had failed. Some 60 “failed” asylum seekers were returned to Kosovo in one day this month.



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