

# German interior ministers demand speedy deportations

## Refugees from Iraq, Afghanistan and Kosovo targetted

**Elisabeth Zimmermann****3 June 2003**

At their May 15 conference in the city of Erfurt, interior ministers representing the German Federal Republic and individual German states decided that refugees coming from Iraq, Afghanistan and Kosovo should be returned to their native countries as rapidly as possible.

The first step is to increase pressure on the refugees to make them leave Germany “voluntarily.” For the time being, deportations to Iraq and Afghanistan are excluded due to the deplorable state of these countries devastated by war, and also because there are no direct flights available to Iraq. However, the interior ministers decided that Iraqis must be returned “as soon as deportations are possible.”

Already before the conference, the interior ministers of states ruled by the CDU (Christian Democratic Union) had demanded that deportations to Afghanistan begin as quickly as possible. According to the interior minister of Hesse, Volker Bouffier (CDU), several interior ministers from states governed by the SPD (German Social Democratic Party) supported the proposal.

In the weeks before, Bouffier had been campaigning in rabble-rousing fashion, demanding deportations to Afghanistan. As he stated to the German Press Agency (DPA), “It should be possible to begin with deportations by the first of July.” According to his figures, 5,000 Afghan refugees live in Hesse—2,000 of whom have already exceeded their allowed stay in Germany and are already obliged to leave. While the remainder have applied for asylum, any acceptance of their applications has been excluded.

With regard to Romani people and members of the Serb minority in Kosovo, the interior ministers reserved the right to organized deportations and to make use of force. They definitely ruled out the possibility of granting these refugees a permanent right of residence, as called for by a number of refugee organisations.

The conference and the decisions made by the interior ministers highlight the cynicism of the German SPD-Green

Party coalition government. For years it supported United Nations sanctions against Iraq and only opposed the US-British war half-heartedly. Now—after the war has devastated what remained of the infrastructure, and water and energy supply, and with millions of people threatened by poverty and disease—the first priority of the federal and various state governments is to send the few people who managed to flee to Germany back to a life of poverty and misery in Iraq. The German government is at least partially responsible for these deplorable living conditions.

The same is true in respect to the situation in Afghanistan. Only a few days before the conference of interior ministers, representatives of the UN and Amnesty International (AI) warned against deporting thousands of Afghan refugees back to Afghanistan—a country increasingly spiralling out of control. In the May 14 edition of the German newspaper *Frankfurter Rundschau*, Stefan Telöken, the spokesman of the UNHCR (Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees) in Germany, explained that any “signal of deportation” of refugees to Afghanistan is “absolutely premature.”

Telöken referred to the report by Lakdar Brahimi, United Nations special emissary in Afghanistan, that was presented to the UN Security Council at the beginning of May. It states that the security situation in most parts of the country, as well as in Kabul itself, has “declined considerably,” with fighting taking place between the Taliban, the supporters of the notorious clan leader Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, and other clans. The report concludes that the Afghan interim government is incapable of dealing with the situation. According to Telöken, the worsening of the situation explains why the number of refugees returning to Afghanistan has fallen considerably this year compared to 2002, when about 1.8 million people returned to Afghanistan from the surrounding countries where they had taken refuge.

In a letter to the conference of German interior ministers, Amnesty International comes to similar conclusions

regarding the situation in Afghanistan. A delegation from the human rights organization had recently conducted its own research in Afghanistan. In the letter, AI warns of setting a date for deportations and questioning the asylum status of accepted refugees.

According to Amnesty International, “Former members of the military, supporters of the communist regime, women, and people who would prefer a secular state are those most likely to be persecuted when they return—because former Mujaheddin and royalists have the say in the interim government as well as in the local authorities. Even the UN organisations would be unable to protect those returning, as they themselves are being targeted by the radicals.”

In Germany, 68,000 Afghans are victims of political pressure urging them to leave the country: 17,000 are formally obliged to leave and have only received short-term residence permits from the German authorities; 51,000 have been granted a long-term right of residence. Many of these have lived in Germany for many years, establishing professions, marrying and beginning families. But the legal situation for refugees in Germany is precarious. The right of residence of accepted refugees can be revoked by a so-called “revocation procedure,” which can be initiated by the “Federal Office for the Acceptance of Foreign Refugees.”

In the midst of the recent war in Iraq, *Spiegel Online* reported on April 3 the story of 42-year-old Iraqi refugee Mohammed al-Ali. He had managed to escape to Germany after spending 11 years in Iraqi prisons, where he suffered severe physical and psychological injuries. Al-Ali had been sentenced because allegedly he and his father had supported the 1991 Shiite uprising by coming to the assistance of wounded victims. His own father died in prison.

*Spiegel Online* reports: “It was only in December last year that al-Ali was able to escape from Iraq to seek refuge in Germany—at least temporarily—because the German authorities want to send this refugee, whose whole body is covered with scars, back to Iraq as quickly as possible—in complete disregard of all public declarations made by the SPD-Green government, which claims they are sympathetic to the situation of the brutally suppressed Iraqi population. For al-Ali this is already the second time in his life when he can personally experience how little words and deeds have to do with one another in Western Democracies.”

Confirmation that the fate of al-Ali is not an exceptional case or misunderstanding by the authorities, but rather evidence of a systematic policy of deterrence carried out by the German authorities, is provided by a report in the March 31 print edition of *Der Spiegel*. The magazine states: “There is still a war going on, but the offices of the German authorities are already considering what should be done with 84,000 Iraqis living in Germany.”

*Der Spiegel* quotes a high-ranking official from the federal office dealing with refugees, who indicated that after the overthrow of Saddam Hussein “the way would be clear to revoke the legal status of a large number of asylum-seekers—as a prerequisite for possible deportations.” The first draft by the federal ministry, outlining a plan to return the 68,000 Afghans, was issued to the governments of the German states last week.

Four years after the NATO war against Yugoslavia, the situation in Kosovo remains catastrophic. According to the decisions made by the conference of interior ministers, Romani people and members of the Serbian minority are to be deported to a region where attacks against minorities are a daily occurrence. The population has virtually no access to medical supplies and education, and 90 percent of Romani people and Serbs in the region are unemployed.

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[17 September 2002]

<http://www.wsbs.org/articles/2002/sep2002/bav-s17.shtml>

European Union plan to restrict immigration

[20 June 2002]

<http://www.wsbs.org/articles/2002/jun2002/immi-j20.shtml>

Fate of Kosovars highlights Europe’s attitude to refugees

[16 April 1999]

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