

Asylum-seekers targeted by rioters in Wales

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Recent clashes between asylum seekers, residents and police on the Caia Park estate in Wrexham, North Wales are the outcome of the Blair government's victimisation of asylum seekers.

Events began with an unprovoked attack on Hoshank Baker Kader, 32, a Kurdish refugee who fled Iraq 10 months ago. Kader was left fighting for his life in intensive care after being attacked by 15 men with iron bars and knives. Fights occurred between a group of around 20 Iraqi Kurds and locals drinking in the Red Dragon pub on the same night. The pub was smashed up and ransacked with its landlord fleeing, having taken tenancy only weeks earlier. Nine people were arrested.

The next night around 200 youths, some who were members of Wrexham Front Line, a hooligan gang that follows the town's football team, gathered outside the pub on the estate. Clashes with police took place as petrol bombs were thrown and cars set alight. A huge police presence the following night, with over 100 officers drafted in from Merseyside, prevented a third night of violence.

Whilst admitting that the first night of violence was racially motivated, the police denied this during the second night of troubles and instead blamed it on "criminality". A BBC reporter who grew up in Wrexham refuted this stating, "[D]uring the last three days on the estate I certainly witnessed racist behaviour for the first time."

She heard people on the estate demanding police "get the Iraqis out" and that, "Saddam Hussein's gone now, they should go back to Iraq."

Political responsibility for this outburst of racial hatred in Caia Park lies with the witch-hunting by the government, Conservative opposition and the media, who all seek to scapegoat asylum-seekers for society's social problems.

The government's policy of "dispersal" whereby asylum seekers are usually located in socially-deprived

areas across the UK has led to the ghettoisation of an immigrant population often without jobs and language skills and isolated from the wider community into which they have been thrust.

The tabloid press has done all it can to portray asylum-seekers as receiving preferential treatment in housing and benefits, in order to encourage hostility amongst local residents who are often socially deprived. Caia Park houses more than 14,000 and is one of the largest and most troubled estates in Wales with high levels of unemployment and acute deprivation. Recently it has been subject to a "fresh start" policy with the estate's name changed from Queens Park to Caia Park and millions of pounds of investment into various schemes on the estate. Prior to the disturbances Caia Park housed around 30 Kurdish refugees in boarded up, hard to let tenement blocks. They have now fled the estate and asked for new accommodation.

The Crown Prosecution Service said in court that there had been "clear racial overtones" and 19 people including a 13-year-old boy have been charged with violent disorder. A total of 47 arrests were made and 30 charged.

The Labour Lord Ouseley, who produced a report on the 2001 race riots in Bradford, told the BBC Radio Four's *Today* programme that racism was an ongoing problem across the whole north Wales region. "It would be wrong for people to be in denial to suggest that race isn't a factor, that there isn't prejudice, that there weren't hostilities or indeed hatred. While it always takes a small incident it then brings to the surface the prejudices that exist, particularly as we have seen the way asylum seekers and refugees have been demonised."

Prime Minister Tony Blair sought to shift blame from government culpability in parliament with a bit of cheap moralising. "Those who advocate extremism or want to turn their anger on people who are immigrants

into this country do absolutely nothing for community relations... and peddle what is a disastrous misconception and misrepresentation,” he said.

But the last six years of the Blair government policy toward asylum-seekers and refugees has served to inculcate such hostility towards those seeking asylum. Home Secretary David Blunkett has often spoken of the negative impact of (bogus) asylum-seekers on already over stretched services like health and education. He has boasted that the fast tracking of asylum applicants has seen the numbers deported rise by 45 percent since last year and has engaged in high-profile rows with France over its failure to stop immigrants seeking access to Britain through the Channel Tunnel.

In contrast to the claims of preferential treatment, the true plight of asylum seekers is dire. They are not allowed to claim mainstream welfare benefits. If they are destitute, the only option is to apply for support with the National Asylum Support Service (NASS) that gives a single adult £37.77 a week—30 percent below the official poverty line. From January 8, the government has withheld support from the majority of people who apply for asylum once inside the UK, rather than at a port.

A joint study by Oxfam and the Refugee Council revealed that of those asylum-seekers with whom organisations have contact, 85 percent experience hunger, 95 percent cannot afford to buy clothes or shoes and 80 percent are not able to maintain good health. Many do not receive the basic support they may be entitled to because the system is badly designed, extremely bureaucratic and poorly run.

Trevor Philips, chairman of the Commission for Racial Equality (CRE), directly blamed the government’s dispersal policy for what took place in Wrexham. Speaking at a conference on design and housing he described government policy as “disastrous”: “The dispersal policy has turned out to be the principle factor in destroying community cohesion in towns and cities. We need to get accommodation to asylum seekers quickly, but we cannot put people in places that are already miserable, anxious and angry.”

As in Bradford and Oldham, which saw clashes two years ago, the far right British National Party is seeking to make capital out of this tragedy. BNP members are canvassing for support in Wrexham and plan to put up candidates. Lead article in Wrexham’s local *Evening*

Leader gave prominence to the BNP’s claim that “We have a public and moral duty as a political party, and asylum is our main policy.”



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