

Germany: Fewer asylum-seekers and more deportations

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On July 13, the German Interior Ministry presented asylum statistics for the first six months of 2003. According to these figures, only 26,452 people sought asylum in Germany in this period. This represents a 27 percent decrease compared to the same period last year, and is 24 percent less than the second half of 2002.

The number of asylum-seekers also fell drastically last year in comparison with 2001. Since the month-on-month trend is also down, the number of asylum-seekers coming to Germany in 2003 looks set to fall to its lowest level since 1985.

The percentage of those asylum-seekers who were recognised as suffering political persecution and granted asylum remained at the markedly low level of the previous year. Altogether, 48,045 asylum decisions were taken by the Federal Office for the Recognition of Foreign Refugees. However, in only approximately 2,000 cases were the applications for asylum regarded as justified or the applicants granted limited protection from deportation on political or humanitarian grounds. This represents a recognition rate of just 4.2 percent.

In 2001, almost a quarter of those seeking refuge in Germany were at least granted temporary protection. In the mid-1980s, with around the same number of asylum applications as today, almost 30 percent of applications were granted asylum.

This alarming development, which is celebrated as a success by the German government, is a direct consequence of its policy of rejecting refugees. The Social Democratic Party-Green Party coalition in Berlin has intensified the inhumane policy of its conservative predecessors, and in only five years has cut the number of asylum-seekers by around nearly two thirds. It retained the conservatives' "safe third country" rule, the most restrictive in Europe, the concept of "safe countries of origin," the excluding of civil war refugees from the asylum process. It also instigated the quartering of refugees near their homeland, making it increasingly impossible for those needing protection to lodge an asylum application in Germany.

If, despite these obstacles, asylum-seekers nevertheless manage to make it to Germany, they face further deterrents. These include the legally dubious rapid deportation proceedings at airports and the setting of welfare support for asylum-seekers 30 percent below the standard rate, while simultaneously prohibiting them from working.

The dramatic decrease in the numbers of asylum-seekers and those granted asylum has nothing to do with an improved security situation worldwide, and this is demonstrated by what is taking place in the main countries of origin of most refugees. These include states like Turkey, China and Iran, which are continually reprimanded (by the German government, amongst others) for their offences against human rights and the use of torture.

Although Turkey has since replaced Iraq as the country of origin for the majority of those seeking asylum in Germany, nearly 12 percent of asylum-seekers still come from Iraq, whose population is suffering from the brutal occupation regime under American and British troops. The situation facing the population has catastrophically worsened since the beginning of the war. The US-British forces confront a guerrilla war involving widespread popular resistance. The response of the occupying powers has been to increasingly resort to arbitrary arrests. Amnesty International has documented serious cases of human rights violations, including the use of torture by the American and British occupiers.

It is worth noting that nearly 25 percent of refugees originate from countries that have been dragged into war at the hands of NATO (or the changing coalitions under US control). Aside from Iraq, these include Serbia, Montenegro and Afghanistan. Official political rhetoric praises these wars as efforts to liberate people from dictatorial regimes and establish "democracy" and "liberty," but the numbers of refugees fleeing from these same countries paint another picture: one oppressive regime is replaced by another. Moreover, the wars are accompanied by a dramatic economic decline. In the resulting desolate social situation minorities rapidly become scapegoats, the target of discrimination and violence; the circumstances facing Roma peoples in Serbia and Montenegro are just one example.

A German Foreign Ministry report last year noted: "The situation facing minorities in the FRY [Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, now Serbia and Montenegro] does not meet...international standards by a long chalk." However, the proportion of refugees from Serbia and Montenegro who are granted asylum is just 0.1 percent. And although there are already hundreds of thousands of internal refugees in the

former Yugoslavia, and more who are returning to a life of poverty and desperation, the German government concluded an agreement with Yugoslavia in November 2002 whereby all refugees, bar a few exceptions, are forced to return.

The result of Germany's deportation policy was clearly shown in a June 23 report in the *Frankfurter Rundschau*. A Roma family, who had lived 12 years in Syke, in Lower Saxony, was taken at night by the police and deported to Belgrade. There they live with thousands of other refugees in misery in the illegal settlement of Deponia. Dominated by huts made from cardboard and corrugated sheeting, there are neither proper roads nor adequate water or electricity services. Since there is no work, they scour the garbage containers coming from Belgrade for bottles, bread and paper. The children are sent to beg on the streets of the Serbian metropolis.

Green Party politician Claudia Roth, the German government's human rights spokesperson, visited Belgrade in order to gain a first-hand picture of the situation confronting refugees deported there. She maintains that a continuation of the deportation policy is inhumane and cannot be justified politically. But these hypocritical words were intended for the press corps accompanying her visit rather than for her government coalition partners, since Berlin continues its policy of deporting people, even into crisis areas.

The German federal and state interior ministers have encouraged the authorities to carry out ever more arbitrary and illegal actions, in order ensure deportations.

On June 26, the deportation of 64 refugees from Düsseldorf to Kosovo failed. Members of minorities such as Roma, Ashkali or Egyptians can only be deported after the UN Interim Administration in Kosovo (UNMIK) has examined each individual case. In addition, a detailed list of the refugees being deported has to be submitted to UNMIK beforehand. This is what was missing on June 26, as the German authorities clearly tried to illegally deport members of minorities.

As the airplane neared Kosovo, UNMIK refused it landing permission. The flight was swiftly rerouted to Podgorica in Montenegro, in order to then take the deportees by bus to Kosovo. Since UNMIK also rejected this approach, the refugees were finally flown back to Düsseldorf. They had to endure nearly 10 hours of intense heat in an airplane hangar, whose windows and doors were firmly locked, and were refused food the entire time.

In the course of this incident, the Kosovo co-coordinator of the UNHCR, Karsten Luethke, declared that the German government was continually deporting refugees to Kosovo who did not originate from the province.

In June, a mother and her seven children were deported to Turkey. The family's door was battered down in the early morning hours and the eight people shipped by airplane to Istanbul, without being able to contact a lawyer or even to take some basic luggage.

The deportation was illegal not only because they were

refused a legal hearing. The mother and her children were deported to Turkey despite being Lebanese Kurds, who had fled the civil war in Lebanon years ago. The claim by the authorities that this was a Turkish family is purely capricious and was a blatant excuse to accelerate the deportation of unwanted refugees.

Moreover, in contravention of both German and international law, the family was torn apart, since the father was excluded from the deportation. German authorities then cynically declared that he could seek to reunite the family by travelling to Turkey.

On July 15, in the course of a failed deportation of a Congolese man, Raphael Botoba, it came to light that despite the escalating violence in the Congo—and the participation of Germany in a military intervention there—further refugees were being deported to the central African state. According to parliamentary state secretary Fritz Rudolf, the government is not considering a ban on deportations to the Congo at this time.

According to the twisted logic of the German government, military intervention by the imperialist powers leads automatically to an improvement in the human rights situation. This argument has been used successively in the former Yugoslavia, in Afghanistan and in Iraq, where following military interventions the proportion of refugees granted asylum sank in each case as forced deportations increased. It will not be any different in the Congo.

The government does not even attempt to hide the duplicity of its own arguments. While it justifies its participation in a military intervention with reference to the increasing violence in the Congo, deportations are pushed through mercilessly, citing the relatively safe situation in the capital. The Congolese churches and international human rights organisations point out that "safe survival is hardly possible" for those returning.

Berlin's ever more ruthless deportation policy is not only directed against refugees in Germany. The government is setting a clear sign of what can be expected by potential refugees should they ever get to Germany. The drastic fall in the numbers of those granted asylum clearly shows that refugees should no longer expect protection from persecution should they make it to German soil. Instead, they face a life under miserable social conditions, with strongly curtailed democratic rights, and under constant fear of deportation to a country where even more intolerable conditions predominate.



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