Moroccan immigrants die trying to reach Spain

Keith Lee
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Fishermen have found the bodies of 10 immigrants who drowned when the boat they were in hit a rock. The bodies were found near Fuerteventura, off Spain's southern coast. The vessel was carrying 28 people, 18 of whom managed to swim ashore.

Spanish rescue workers are looking for a further 15 immigrants whose boat capsized a few days ago.

Police have carried out sweeping arrests of suspected illegal immigrants. On August 4 civil guards arrested 21 Asian immigrants in Fuerteventura.

So far this year alone, 40 immigrants have died in the seas around the Canary Islands, and a further 30 people are still missing. The majority of immigrants are from North Africa, especially Morocco, and are seeking escape from the grinding poverty in that country. While some manage the perilous crossing of the Strait of Gibraltar separating Spain from Morocco, many others perish trying.

The majority are trying to reach the Canary Islands in flimsy boats. One boat that was recently intercepted was carrying 14 passengers, including seven women, two of whom were pregnant. A Moroccan human rights group has estimated that since 1997 4,000 people have died or disappeared attempting the journey.

While the majority of people making the journey are adults there has been an increase in the numbers of children and teenagers amongst them. The Spanish government estimates that the numbers of children attempting to flee Morocco for Spain has increased from 811 in 1997 to 3,500 by 2000.

Though such official figures should be treated with caution--the right-wing government of Popular Party leader Jose Marie Aznar is using them to justify a clamp down on immigration--there is no doubt that there has been a significant increase in those attempting the journey. For the Aznar government, these children are not minors requiring protection but illegal immigrants who must be swiftly removed from the country. Very few of the children making it to Spanish shores achieve legal status or are given access to education. Most are simply sent back to Morocco as soon as they become 18.

Liliana Suarez Navaz, a professor of migration and multiculturalism at the Autonomous University in Madrid has criticised the government saying, “There is a resistance to give children papers, because no one wants them to become citizens later on, but without papers, these children get stuck in no man's land. They often go to the street, and the street is mean. Children who never would have stolen or done drugs in Morocco are guaranteed this world on the street.”

In March this year a nationwide conference was held on Moroccan minors, where Spanish and international human rights groups urged the Aznar government to give more protection towards child immigrants.

Their call has fallen on deaf ears. Under current Spanish law, an undocumented minor who has spent nine months in Spain must receive a residence permit if their parents cannot be located. In reality, obtaining a permit is near impossible. Elena Arece Jimenez, an attorney specialising in immigrants' rights said, “The officials pass the responsibility on like a hot potato, hoping that in the meantime the child turns 18 ... and can be sent back to Morocco.”

Minors caught crossing to the mainland are held in a children's refugee centre in Ceuta. One hundred minors are held there already. Many of the children escape only to be returned by the police the following day.

“Their goal is not to stay in a residence centre, only to be deported home at age 18,” says Ana Moreno, a nun who works with immigrants in Ceuta. “On the street, there is at least the chance to slip into a truck

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crossing the sea.”

Morocco has come under pressure from Spain to take back the children. However, 30,000 street children already overwhelm Morocco’s social services and many Moroccan children in Spain have lost all contact with their families.

Now the Aznar government has pledged to become the guardian of the southernmost frontier of “fortress Europe”, in return for aid from the European Union. The EU has already given Spain a $300 million subsidy to fence off large parts of its coastline to stop illegal immigration.

This is only the latest in a series of increasingly tough measures introduced by Aznar against immigrants. In 2001 the government introduced new measures aimed at strengthening an aliens law (*Ley de Extranjería*) that had been passed the previous year.

Under the legislation, foreign workers lost the right of association, including the right to participate in public demonstrations or rallies, to join a trade union and to take industrial action.

The ability of immigrant workers to bring other family members, outside of their immediate family, to Spain was also blocked. Now access to housing aid is to disappear, as will access to education for foreign minors.

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