Britain: Iranian asylum seeker driven to suicide

Linda Slattery
12 September 2003

The desperate plight facing asylum seekers in Britain under the Labour government was tragically underlined by the self-immolation of 30-year-old Iranian Israfil Shiri on September 3. Five days after dousing himself with petrol at the offices of Refugee Action in Manchester and setting himself alight, Israfil died after suffering intense agony in the Burns Unit of Wythenshawe Hospital. Before taking his own life, he declared that he wanted to protest against the government's harsh treatment of asylum seekers fleeing persecution.

Israfil fled Iran after he and his family had been persecuted at the hands of the government. Employed by the military, he had refused to carry out orders that involved harming others. A year ago, the Home Office in Britain turned down his plea for asylum.

His predicament was compounded by a complicated medical condition. As a refused asylum seeker, he was denied medical attention, deprived of benefits and evicted from his council flat in Salford. According to a friend, he was in great pain, was terrified of being sent back to Iran and had lost all hope.

Reza Moradi of the International Federation of Iranian Refugees explained, "Once you are facing deportation to the jailers of the Islamic regime, you can't have a solicitor, you have no house to live in, you can't work. That is enough for people to commit suicide or do something like this."

Following the death of Israfil, 50 other Iranian asylum seekers in Manchester attended a meeting convened by the National Coalition of Anti-Deportation Campaigns to set up a support organisation to end the isolation of asylum seekers and prevent the occurrence of further tragedies. They were keen to speak to the *World Socialist Web Site* in order to publicise the plight of those seeking asylum in Britain.

P.A., a mother of two, explained that she escaped from Iran with her family two years ago:

"The Iranian government killed my friend's husband. When I hid my friend and her family in my home I was imprisoned, twice."

In March, she was ordered to quit Britain, and it is only because of the efforts of friends and supporters that she has been able to stay. The stress of fighting deportation has taken its toll on her health. She had to have an operation and has been under the care of a psychologist for panic attacks. Her son, who also attended the meeting and had made a film criticising the Iranian government, had suffered a heart attack that was probably induced by stress.

She stated her opposition to the war in Iraq and explained that she understood why the Iraqi people were revolting against the presence of British and American troops in Iraq.

A young man of 25 explained that he had been seeking asylum in Europe since he was 18. In Britain for the last 14 months, he explained that he couldn't live on the meagre £30 a week doled out by the government, but that he couldn't work legally either because as an asylum seeker he didn't have a national insurance number. "The government is making a criminal out of me. All I can do is work illegally, paying no tax, for £2 an hour," he complained.

Thirty-two-year old Iranian artist F. said that when the Home Office turned down his plea for asylum, it was on the grounds that "President Khatami had now made freedom for the people of Iran!" He intends to hold an exhibition of his paintings in October, illustrating the problems people face in Iran as well as the harsh realities of being an asylum seeker.

Six months ago, Prime Minister Tony Blair declared that the numbers of asylum seekers would be halved by

© World Socialist Web Site

September. In October of last year, there were 8,900 applications for asylum, falling to 3,600 in June of this year. The government has achieved this ruthless target by a number of measures, including the introduction of visa requirements for people from Zimbabwe, the setting up of UK border controls on French soil, and the extension of the “white list” of countries where people can be returned before their appeals are heard.

In total 3,145 asylum seekers were sent to their countries of origin in the second quarter of this year, a 20 percent increase over the previous quarter. According to Amnesty International, to set targets for acceptable numbers of asylum seekers undermines the very principle of refugee protection and flouts the 1951 Geneva Convention.

The government also plans to cut legal aid, which asylum seekers need in order to employ a lawyer to make their case to immigration officers. Previously, they were allowed legal assistance totalling 100 hours, but this will now be cut to 5 hours.

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

© World Socialist Web Site