

## Deportations and the border regime

# The deadly consequences of Germany's refugee policy

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Last September, the intelligence service (*Verfassungsschutz*) of the German state of Brandenburg seized acts of vandalism against the immigration office in the town of Frankfurt-Oder in order to slander the *World Socialist Web Site*, accusing it of promoting violence and constituting part of a milieu of violent “left extremism.”

The pretext for this political attack was an article published by the WSWS nearly three years ago entitled, “Deportation policy and the border regime: The deadly consequences of German refugee policy.” The Brandenburg intelligence agency claimed that a copy of the article was left behind at the scene of the vandalized immigration office, and on this basis held the WSWS responsible.

“The road to criminal acts is paved with such texts,” the intelligence service declared in a report posted on its web site. The report continued by making a number of distortions and false claims regarding the content of the WSWS article and then expressed doubts over its accuracy in recounting the consequences of Germany's refugee policy.

The WSWS article was based on reputable sources and generally available information. It established factually that over a period of seven years—between 1993 and 2000—at least 239 refugees lost their lives, with many more suffering injuries, as a result of government-imposed measures aimed at suppressing immigration.

During this period, the number of immigrants who lost their lives on Germany's borders, and as a result of brutal deportation measures and the inhuman conditions prevailing in deportation centres, exceeded the number of victims of racist attacks. The article concluded by stating that, despite occasional lip service by politicians proclaiming their hostility to racism, state policies in the end only served to validate the neo-Nazis' view that the life of an “undesirable” alien in Germany is worthless.

According to the intelligence service's online report: “The author of this article accuses the immigration authorities, the border police (BGS) and regular police of treating refugees and foreigners in a contemptuous manner and claims that the so-called BGS ‘border regime’ prevents refugees from entering Germany in the first place. In addition, the practice of deportation is also dealt with in a very critical manner. In the course of deportation those involved have been repeatedly injured (sic!) or have even died. In light of these ‘facts’ the author expresses her scepticism as to whether the struggle against the extreme right by the forces of the state is serious in its intent.”

What is one to make of a state agency that is formally obliged to protect the constitution and human dignity, but calls into question information that has appeared regularly in newspapers and has been documented by various organisations involved in the defence of immigrants' rights? It is factually indisputable that, because of the difficulties involved in legally entering European countries, large numbers of refugees from all over the world have lost their lives or been injured in attempts to enter Europe by

other means. They have drowned or frozen to death while attempting to cross rivers or seas, suffocated in sealed containers or come to harm in the course of fleeing from border guards. In addition, migrants confront intolerable conditions in deportation centres and camps and are often subjected to brutal treatment by police or guards in the course of deportation.

There is no evidence that the conditions exposed by the WSWS article in 2001 have improved in the intervening years. This fact cannot have escaped the notice of the authorities of a state such as Brandenburg, which shares a common border with Poland and where refugees have drawn up their own memorandum on the inhuman conditions and treatment of immigrants.

### Cases of death and injuries at the borders

Victims continue to drown trying to cross the Oder and Neiße rivers into Germany. Other immigrants have suffered injuries by police tracker dogs or have been shot by border police.

The following brief chronology is taken from a document issued by the German parliament (serial no.14/8432), outlining cases pertaining solely to the month of July 2001:

July 8: Close to the Czech-Saxony border in Neuhermsdorf a person of Romanian origin was bitten and injured by a police dog in the course of being arrested by German border police.

July 16: North of the Brandenburg Ortschaft Manschow on the German-Polish border an unknown, most likely drowned person was pulled out of the river Oder.

July 22: A drowned person who could not be identified was pulled out of the river in the vicinity of the town of Frankfurt-Oder.

July 31: In the Saxony region of Niederschlag a person of Armenian origin was bitten by a BGS dog in the border region to the Czech Republic.

This list could be continued at length for the remaining months of 2001.

There are no official figures available for either this year or last year. This not because of any change in practice on the part of immigration authorities and the border police, but instead reflects a change in the composition of the German parliament following the 2002 general election. Prior to 2001 the fraction of the Party for Democratic Socialism (PDS) had regularly inquired into the fate of refugees on German borders. In the 2002 election, the PDS lost its fraction status in parliament and no other German party, including the Social Democrats (SPD) and Greens, has expressed any interest in obtaining current information on such

matters.

In the annual report of the BGS for 2002, German Interior Minister Otto Schily (SPD) asserted that the number of “unauthorised entries at the country’s borders” as well as “cases of smuggling” had declined considerably in comparison to the previous year. He stated that the basis for this “success by border police” was a “strengthening of border supervision and improvements in collaboration across borders as part of the continuing process of European integration and the associated elaboration and imposition of international combat strategies.”

Refugee deterrence has been effectively shifted farther eastward as part of the so-called “joint patrols” policy and increased cooperation between the BGS and the police of other European countries adjoining Germany (Poland, Chechnya and other Eastern European states). The aim is to prevent refugees from crossing the outer borders of Europe. According to Schily, “The dispatch of border police communications officers and advisors, as well as increased bilateral training and provision of equipment for middle and far Eastern European states, has contributed to reduce pressure on the Schengen [the 15 European Union members that have abolished controls on their common borders] external borders.”

The report makes no mention of the methods used to deter, detect and arrest refugees on EU borders and there is no information as to the human costs of such border policies.

### **Suicide and self-imposed injuries**

The number of self-imposed injuries, suicide attempts and suicides by refugees remains very high. Such tragedies arise from the desperate reaction of many refugees to impending deportations or to the deplorable conditions in the refugee camps and deportation centres.

In the years 2001-2002, the Anti-Racist Initiative Berlin documented eight cases of refugees who either committed suicide prior to their deportations or were killed as they attempted to flee imprisonment. Over the same period, at least 57 persons facing deportation (28 were already incarcerated in deportation centres) either deliberately injured themselves or attempted suicide—in most cases surviving with severe injuries.

There are no figures available for 2003, but press reports have brought to light a number of cases. In January of this year, refugee David Mamedov hanged himself following a visit to the immigration offices in the region of Gütersloh. Mamedov first entered Germany with his family from Georgia at the end of 1996 and was awarded refugee status in February 1997. He was a member of an oppressed minority community in Georgia, subject to persecution by both state and non-state groups. Mamedov had been repeatedly mistreated by police in his homeland—in one incident his leg was seriously burned with a hot iron.

German authorities argued against maintaining Mamedov’s refugee status, arguing that attacks carried out by police cannot be counted as state repression. The upper court for the city of Munster accepted this line of argument, and shortly before his suicide Mamedov was informed that he would be deported. Less than six months later, Mamedov’s widow was also informed that she had to leave the country immediately or would herself face deportation to Georgia.

In July 2003, 33-year-old Hüseyin D. set himself on fire in the building of the same immigration office. He died shortly afterwards from his injuries. Hüseyin D. faced forcible deportation although he was married to a woman who had a valid residence permit. In a cynical commentary on the self-immolation, Gütersloh official Sven-Georg Adenauer declared: “It is unbelievable to what lengths people will go to avoid expulsion. In future we will not allow ourselves to be put under pressure, in particular by such types of actions.”

On August 16, 2003, 16-year-old Nurcan B. jumped from the window of a house in Wendlingen in a vain attempt to avoid deportation. She was transferred to hospital with grievous bodily injuries. The young girl had spent almost her entire life in Germany and faced being deported to a country completely alien to her.

On October 3, 2003, 48-year-old Lewon A. set himself on fire and later died from his injuries. A married man with children, he had lost his job due to immigration regulations and had been threatened on a number of occasions with deportation. His appeals to stay in the country had been rejected despite support for him from a number of church and immigration organisations as well as his former employer. The family’s priest, Christoph Schulze-Gockel, stated after the suicide: “Herr A. is a further victim of German immigration and refugee law. Fear of persecution following deportation and the fact that his residency allowance had to be permanently renewed have worked to crush these people.” The rest of A’s family continue to face deportation.

### **Deportation jails and refugee camps**

For years various refugee organisations have charged that conditions prevailing in deportation centres and refugee camps are an insult to human dignity and are evidently aimed at breaking the spirit of those incarcerated—and thereby deterring attempts by other undocumented immigrants to enter Germany.

In an open letter, the inhabitants of one refugee centre in Brandenburg (Rathenow) wrote of the “humiliating treatment” they receive from those working in the centre. The letter also criticised the security firm “Security Zarnikow.” Security measures were solely directed at the refugees, whose private mail was subject to scrutiny by guards. The refugees in the centre were also able to establish that known neo-Nazis were employed by the security firm. Last winter it was revealed that at least four members of the firm were members of an extreme right-wing organisation (“Kameradschaft Hauptvolk”).

Inhabitants of another centre in the state of Thuringia sent a letter of protest to the state interior minister complaining of deplorable conditions and treatment. “The head of the centre treats us like animals, slaves or prisoners.... We have been threatened with deportation if we complain about the situation.” The residents were particularly concerned about the lack of medical treatment as well as the isolation of the centre. The nearest village was 5 kilometres away and the next nearest town 25 kilometres. In addition, the centre’s interior grounds were fenced off with barbed wire.

In the deportation prison located in the Berlin suburb of Köpenick, 68 detainees went on hunger strike in January 2003 in protest over abominable living conditions, lack of hygiene and prolonged periods of detention. In the Köpenick jail there have been a series of suicides and attempted suicides by innocent individuals who were only arrested because the authorities deemed there was a danger they would “go underground.” Some of these victims have spent up to 18 months in a deportation prison. For every day of detention, the authorities impose a fee of 60 euros to be repaid by the detainees should they ever be released.

In their press statement, the imprisoned refugees on hunger strike reported on the humiliating treatment they had received at the hands of prison personnel. “A person who collapsed into unconsciousness was merely met with laughter.... Police personnel behave in an utterly arbitrary manner, employing humiliation and ridicule. Every request or question leads to open rudeness and abuse on their part.”

## Brutal deportations

Deportations are often carried out with extreme brutality—particularly in cases where the refugee attempts to defend himself or when the police anticipate the possibility of resistance.

Sometimes the deportees are physically restrained and gagged, immobilised through the forced administration of drugs or driven out of their homes and onto planes at the barrel of a gun.

In this respect, the deportation transport to Nigeria on November 20, 2002, is exemplary. The flight carried 21 deportees from Germany and 24 from Italy. On landing in Nigeria, most of them had fresh wounds on their ankles and wrists, indicating that they had been restrained for the entire flight only to be freed shortly before landing. The deportees were exhausted and declared that they had been subject to severe mistreatment by both the German and Italian police. Nigerian immigration authorities refused to accept the admission of two men, who were then returned to Germany. One of them was unconscious and was unable to leave the plane on his own volition; the second had a broken neck.

Since 1993, five refugees have died in the course of deportation, with at least 179 injured as a result of physical restraint or mistreatment in the course of deportation.

In light of the lack of interest on the part of German authorities, together with the obstacles faced by refugee organisations in their attempts to obtain information, the fate of deportees upon being returned to their countries of origin is largely unknown. Politically persecuted deportees are often arrested at the airport as they leave the plane to be subjected to renewed torture, or they simply “disappear” without a trace.

In July 2001, for example, according to reports in the Turkish press, out of a total of 63 persons deported in a charter plane from the German state of North Rhine Westphalia to Turkey, 25 were immediately arrested upon landing, accused of membership of the banned Kurdish Workers Party, (PKK).

In January 2002, following a 31-day hunger strike, the severely weakened refugee E. was deported to Togo. Since then, there has been no trace of him, although he had agreed to report by telephone to a refugee organisation. He was a member of the opposition group *Union des Forces pour le Changement* (UFC). He had fled Togo after military police arrested his father, who was also active in the UFC and disappeared after his arrest.

According to research carried out by the Anti-Racist Initiative Berlin, since 1993 at least 13 persons are known to have been killed following their deportations from Germany, with at least 307 persons tortured or mistreated by police or the military upon landing in their country of origin. A minimum of 47 disappeared without a trace.

Refugees not faced with political persecution have also suffered as a result of deportation: for example, in those cases where someone seriously ill is deported to a country where there is no possibility of adequate medical treatment. Such was the case of Sikrie Dervisholli, an Albanian who entered Germany from Kosovo. At four in the morning on November 5, 2002, she was dragged out of her bed by police and put on a plane to Pristina.

Ms. Dervisholli suffered from a severe illness of the nervous system which, in the absence of proper treatment, results in paralysis and can lead to a torturous death. Numerous testimonies by doctors and her lawyer were insufficient to sway the authorities to suspend her deportation. The victim had no relatives in Kosovo and was merely attempting to spend the short period of life left to her with her sister in Germany. Her neurologist bitterly remarked on her treatment at the hands of the authorities, asking: “How could anyone allow a person to die so miserably?”



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