

Dutch parliament votes to deport asylum seekers

Paul Bond
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The Dutch parliament voted February 17 to expel some 26,000 asylum seekers from the Netherlands over the next three years, marking an escalation in the brutalisation of immigrants across Europe. The bill—passed by 83 to 57 votes in the lower house—has yet to be ratified by parliament’s upper house, but no obstacles are expected. Indeed, the centre-right coalition government of Jan Pieter specifically rejected a number of opposition amendments designed to slightly soften the legislation.

The bill affects all asylum seekers who arrived in the country before April 2001. They include Afghans, Somalis and Chechens facing civil wars or a return to regions with no functioning government. Many of those affected have been in the country for more than five years and have had children who have been raised within Dutch communities. Some have spent up to 10 years applying for residence, and consider themselves Dutch.

All those who arrived before April 2001, and whose asylum applications have been rejected, are to be offered plane tickets and given eight weeks to leave the country. Levels of payment offered are to be assessed on circumstance by special committees. If asylum seekers refuse, they will be rounded up by immigration officers, supported by armed police if necessary, and taken to a departure centre. Here, for up to another eight weeks, they will come under pressure from lawyers and civil servants to leave voluntarily. The government has already opened deportation centres for the detention of families.

If they still refuse to leave the country, they face a six-month prison sentence. They will then also lose any entitlement to a job, welfare, housing and health care. The government hopes that this will both force their expulsion and satisfy its obligations to support

“voluntary” departure under international human rights conventions.

The bill was drawn up in response to criticism of the length of time applicants had to wait under previous governments. Many applicants had already settled in the country by the time their application was rejected. The solution of Balkenende and his immigration minister, Rita Verdonk of the People’s Party for Liberty and Democracy (VVD), is to accelerate the rejections and to drive out those who are already settled.

A backlog of asylum applications had built up under previous governments. When the former immigration minister, Hilwand Nawijn of the anti-immigrant List Pim Fortuyn (LPF), announced an amnesty for long-term resident asylum seekers, over 10,000 people who had been waiting more than five years for a decision applied. Verdonk took on these applications after last year’s general election marginalised the LPF.

However, immigration officials were already writing to applicants telling them they did not meet the criteria even before the criteria had been established. Once the criteria were set, only 3,260 of the applicants qualified. Of these, Verdonk claimed some 700 were wanted for war crimes. The total number of those granted residence rights under the amnesty were just over 2,000. Another 200 were included, on humanitarian grounds, because of extreme hardship.

Asylum applications have in fact dropped by almost 75 percent in the last four years. They fell from 43,560 in 2000 to 18,670 in 2002. Last year, the figure was estimated to be 10,000.

The press has invoked the spectre of the rightist demagogue Pim Fortuyn, who was assassinated in 2002. After last year’s general election, Balkenende’s Christian Democratic Appeal (CDA) and Gerrit Zalm

of the VVD used the LPF to facilitate a rightward shift in their own agenda, whilst establishing their coalition government without them. Their success in this can be seen by how much further than Fortuyn they have gone. Fortuyn called for an end to immigration, which was “diluting Dutch values,” but he also called for an amnesty for illegal long-term residents without a criminal record.

Balkenende and his coalition partners in the VVD voted for the bill, along with several smaller right-wing parties. The opposition Labour Party (PvdA), Socialist Party (SP) and the Green Lefts (GroenLinks) voted against the bill. Although they proposed various measures to soften the legislation, the only one accepted by the government was not to break up families.

The PvdA is only asking for an extension of the amnesty to 8,000 of the 26,000 threatened. Its record on defending immigrants does not bear scrutiny. During the election campaign, for example, the PvdA’s Wouter Bos called for those failing a mandatory Dutch language course to suffer a cut in benefits. The PvdA also announced its intentions of continuing to use a special military unit to track down and deport immigrants without papers.

Dutch municipalities and major city administrations had expressed concern at the bill. They protested that evicted asylum seekers could end up on the street. Verdonk assured them that anybody who was evicted would end up in a detention centre!

The bill has met widespread popular opposition. There have been numerous demonstrations against the proposals, and according to opinion polls, some two-thirds of Dutch people think that an amnesty should be granted to those who have been in the country for more than five years. Asylum seekers are threatening mass hunger strikes. One Iranian asylum seeker sewed up his eyes and mouth in protest. The Dutch Council of Churches has written to protest the bill. Church groups and individuals have said that they will take in and protect people threatened with deportation.

Rather than a natural revulsion to such policies, Verdonk blames this on “an iron ring of lawyers and social workers” who are “taking advantage of people’s emotions” and creating media hype.

In a letter to Verdonk, the organisation Human Rights Watch (HRW) expressed concern that the Netherlands’

action was illegal, and a “departure from international standards and practice.” They point, amongst other matters, to the Dutch government’s decision that children of rejected asylum applicants should not be entitled to the rights embodied in the Convention on the Rights of the Child. (The text of the HRW’s letter can be found at <http://hrw.org/english/docs/2004/02/12/nether7360.htm> .)

The same day that the Dutch parliament met, Denmark said it would change its immigration laws to increase fines for people aiding failed asylum seekers. Two days later, the leader of Britain’s opposition Conservatives, Michael Howard, spoke in Burnley, a northern town where the fascist British National Party has made gains. Pitching for the racist and xenophobic vote, Howard insisted that “No one should be allowed to claim asylum when they reach Britain.”

“You cannot have a credible immigration policy if anyone can circumvent it by entering our country illegally, uttering the words ‘I claim asylum’ and be allowed to stay here even if they have no genuine claim,” he said.

The leader of the far-right National Front in France, Jean-Marie Le Pen, said that the Dutch decision, “proves that good sense is starting to prevail among European governments.”



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