

Britain: Iraqi asylum seeker ends 46-day hunger strike

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Late on Saturday August 21, asylum-seeker Naseh Ghafor ended a 46-day hunger strike begun in protest at plans by Britain's Home Office to deport him to Iraq.

Ghafor, 20 years old, had sown his lips closed on July 8 outside the Sheffield office of Home Secretary David Blunkett and began refusing food. His decision to end the protest came at the urging of friends and supporters, in the face of the Home Office making plain it was prepared to see Ghafor die rather than grant any reprieve.

An Iraqi Kurd, Ghafor fled his country after his father and brother were shot dead by the Saddam Hussein regime as part of its reprisals in the north. Ghafor's mother and two sisters are also missing, presumed dead.

He has argued that despite the removal of Saddam Hussein, his life remains at risk if he is returned to Iraq. This stand is supported by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNCHR), which has requested a continued ban on forced returns, including rejected asylum cases, to all parts of the country. The UNCHR has stated that continuing instability in Iraq means that all Iraqi asylum-seekers should continue to be offered temporary protection by governments in those countries in which they currently reside.

Nearly three-quarters of those applying for asylum in the UK are fleeing conflicts at home. People from Iraq, Afghanistan and the former Yugoslavia make up the largest number of claims—a further indication of how the Blair government's neo-colonial ambitions are causing instability and suffering to ever-larger numbers of people. The US-led invasion of Iraq has only substituted new forms of oppression and violence in place of that which it was supposedly aimed at resolving. Human Rights Watch has highlighted the fact that property disputes between Kurds returning to

northern Iraq and Arab settlers is “potentially one of massive proportions” that “could soon explode into open violence.”

The British government has rejected the UNCHR's recommendations, however, and in March Ghafor's final appeal against deportation was turned down. Subsequently, Ghafor was evicted from his accommodation and all financial assistance was withdrawn, forcing him to sleep on the floor of a friend's flat.

Homeless and destitute, Ghafor begun his hunger strike in a last-ditch attempt to highlight his case and pressure the Home Office into a stay of execution. In the last days of his protest, Ghafor had become extremely weak and was told that he was only days away from death.

But Blunkett insisted there would be no reprieve for Ghafor, and accused those backing his fight against deportation of being responsible for the young Iraqi's plight. In a letter to Sheffield Trades Council, the home secretary accused Ghafor's supporters of being “dangerous and irresponsible” and of encouraging those whose asylum claims have been rejected “to believe that they can simply overturn the process by self-mutilation.”

Turning reality on its head, Blunkett went on to claim that those defending asylum-seekers against deportation were acting “in a way which is clearly against the interests of individual asylum-seekers” and without “sufficient concern for Mr. Ghafor's health, wellbeing and safety.”

Having abandoned his protest, Ghafor was still too ill to attend a press conference on his plight held on Tuesday, August 24. Suffering from headaches and stomach pains as a result of starvation, he is only able to take small quantities of water and vitamins at the

moment. In a statement he explained that he felt that he had no alternative but to take such extreme action. “I preferred to die rather than stay in the UK with no job, housing or income and face deportation,” he wrote.

Ghafor has entered a new asylum application for temporary humanitarian protection, in line with the UNCHR’s recommendations, and has requested that he be allowed to work whilst it is considered. “I should not have special treatment,” he said. “Everyone should have the right to work. The UN has said no Iraqi should go back now.”

His appeal continues to fall on deaf ears, with the Home Office reiterating its refusal to reconsider Ghafor’s case.

In the last years the government has seized on the issue of asylum as a political means of demonstrating its right-wing credentials, whilst scapegoating refugees for the social crisis that its policies have produced. The lack of affordable public housing, overburdened health and education services, crime rates and general social disrepair and neglect—all these are now routinely blamed on asylum-seekers by the media.

This has the desired effect of diverting attention from the real source of such social ills in Labour’s pro-big business agenda, whilst providing a pretext for the government’s efforts to further curtail the right to asylum as part of a broader offensive against democratic rights in general.

One such example is the plight of failed a asylum-seeker, Dorcas, who fled the war in the Democratic Republic of Congo in fear for her life, following the murder of her husband.

Dorcas arrived in the UK in 2003 and applied for asylum, but her claim was turned down in October and her right to appeal was also rejected. In the meantime her health deteriorated rapidly. Doctors uncovered a large lump in her abdomen that was causing her to bleed profusely and recommended a hysterectomy, but under new rules introduced in April Dorcas is classed as an “overstayer” or “tourist” and must pay for any non-emergency treatment in National Health Service hospitals. The rules will also apply to General Practitioner services from next month.

The hospital informed Dorcas that despite her continuing pain, she was not a medical emergency as they had been able to stem the bleeding and she received a £700 bill for tests that had been carried out

to identify her problem. Without any means of subsistence Dorcas was neither able to pay the bill, nor fund the operation she requires. The Home Office has said it intends to proceed with her removal. If the forced journey does not kill her, then her return to the DCR almost certainly will.

The imposition of such harsh conditions against those seeking asylum—including forcible deportation and detention—combined with ever-tougher border controls that have made it virtually impossible for refugees to enter the country legally, has led to a significant drop in the numbers of asylum applications. The Home Office’s rejection of Ghafor’s latest appeal came at the same time that it released data showing that the number of new asylum applications had fallen by 13 percent in the second quarter of 2004. True to form, the government celebrated the figures as a “success” story.



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