

German interior minister proposes African internment camps for refugees

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4 August 2004

Just as a scientist reads a seismograph to measure movements in the ground, the character of a government can be judged by the way it treats the most disadvantaged layers of society. However, the latest proposals regarding refugees to come from Otto Schily's (Social Democratic Party) Interior Ministry make such a sensitive instrument superfluous in estimating the anti-social and reactionary politics of the German government.

Schily is pushing for the establishment of internment camps in Africa for refugees from that continent, meaning they would not be allowed to enter European Union (EU) territory until their applications had been accepted. The plan is, however, not entirely new—Tony Blair's British Labour government originally put forward the idea one year ago. But the vehemence with which Schily is publicising it, and the fact that the German government has been at the forefront in Europe of attacks against refugees and immigrants for more than a decade, could herald a direct assault on the very right to asylum in Europe.

Schily used the occasion of last month's rescue of African refugees who were shipwrecked off the coast of Italy to start his campaign. Thirty-seven refugees were picked up at sea by the German aid organisation Cap Anamur and brought to Sicily. Not only did the German Immigration Department deny the right of these refugees to even apply for asylum, Schily went so far as to threaten criminal proceedings against the crew of the ship and the leader of Cap Anamur on charges of aiding illegal immigration.

The slanderous charge by the Interior Ministry—that the entire rescue operation in the Mediterranean Sea was a staged stunt—was taken up by ostensibly liberal newspapers such as the *Frankfurter Rundschau* and the *Süddeutsche Zeitung*. The rescue of people facing a life-

threatening situation was followed by a “questionable PR campaign,” according to these newspapers. The papers supported this argument by citing the fact that the Italian authorities quickly rejected the refugees' asylum applications.

This decision, however, was a foregone conclusion after the Italian interior minister, Giuseppe Pisanu, said that the refugees came from Nigeria and Ghana and not from Sudan, as was originally claimed, and consequently their applications would be unconditionally rejected. Within days, the refugees were deported.

For the German interior minister this was the signal for a further offensive against asylum seekers. Schily's forum was last month's EU meeting, where guidelines on asylum and immigration matters for the next five years were discussed.

Schily adopted the idea of the British government to prevent refugee applicants from entering the EU by establishing a “cordon sanitaire” around the EU countries, where internment camps would be built close to the routes taken by refugees. Asylum seekers would then no longer be allowed entry into the EU, but instead be placed in these camps, where they would remain until their applications were either accepted or rejected.

It is not hard to imagine what Schily's camps would look like: heavily guarded emergency accommodations surrounded by barbed wire, with material and medical provisions kept to an absolute minimum. Abuses would be internally investigated, outside the regular judicial process.

Under Schily's proposal, even if the right to asylum were recognised, refugees would find it nearly impossible to enter Europe. African states having agreements with the EU would simply be declared safe havens, and the refugees would be sent there. Only in

exceptional cases would they be allowed into the EU.

“Assimilation into Europe would be considered only on a voluntary basis,” declared Schily. The precedent for Schily’s plan was established during the Kosovo crisis. At that time the EU placed refugees in camps in Albania, because EU states refused to allow them within their own borders.

Schily alleges that no asylum seekers who made it to Europe would be deported to the proposed camps in Africa. However, this is just window dressing. Such camps would not deter those seeking to make the dangerous journey across the Mediterranean Sea, and it is precisely for refugees who succeeded in reaching Europe that the camps would be set up. Those in need of protection and assistance would be immediately sent back for placement in a camp in Africa. These measures would result in mass deportations of foreigners on a scale far greater than the 200,000 currently deported every year from Europe.

The camps would permit much harsher treatment of asylum seekers than is currently the case. The current limited initiatives designed to assist refugees and the ability of human rights organisations to monitor their treatment would no longer apply in the African camps. The EU would establish a virtual law-free zone, in which refugees would be denied any form of legal assistance. An expedited procedure for dealing with their cases could therefore be implemented. The EU would quickly reject their applications and the refugees would be sent back to face poverty and persecution.

Through the erection of such camps, the EU could also prevent demonstrations against its inhuman refugee policies. The speedy hearings and deportations of the 37 refugees in Italy prompted massive protests in Sicily against their treatment and altercations with the police. In contrast to the coverage of this case in the German media, a broad-based solidarity movement emerged in Italy, demanding the integration of the refugees into that country.

Some commentators have noted that the original British proposal for such camps was rejected a year ago by the EU Commission. At the time, the Commission foresaw legal and practical problems and refused to provide the resources to implement the plan.

However, another report issued in June 2003 contained proposals for a future EU asylum policy that came close to the measures now espoused by Schily.

According to this report, the entry of asylum seekers into the EU should be controlled and restricted so that refugees would not only be handled “close to home,” but also in third and transit countries, where an asylum system could be established and refugees picked up and processed before setting foot inside the EU. Great Britain was so encouraged by the report that it put forward the idea of single-handedly establishing such camps. It is erroneous, therefore, to conclude that the EU would reject such a proposal.



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