

Spanish government immigration policy costs migrant lives

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The recently elected Socialist Party government's immigration policy has done nothing to alleviate the suffering of an increasingly desperate number of immigrants trying to reach Spain from Africa.

In the main it has continued the right-wing policy of its Popular Party (PP) predecessor, which allowed small numbers of migrants into Spain to work in menial jobs, whilst excluding the vast majority as part of its efforts to consolidate a "Fortress Europe".

Spain has come under pressure from the European Union to strengthen its borders, and has received massive funding in order to stem the flow of refugees from Morocco and Algeria. One of the government's first measures for controlling migration flows was to raise the height of the double fence that surrounds Spain's remaining possessions in North Africa from 4 metres to over 8.2 metres.

The majority of migrants who try to reach the Spanish enclave of Ceuta on the African coast hide in mountain camps, living in makeshift shelters before making the 50-kilometre trek overland to Ceuta. While a handful avoids the Spanish police, most are sent back with beatings and teargas in their lungs.

Morocco has been reluctant to bow to Spanish pressure over immigration controls, especially as the country receives close to \$4 billion in revenue every year from workers overseas. The remittances have been estimated at nine percent of GDP—up from five percent in the mid-1990s. Money transfers from workers abroad, mainly from Italy, Spain and France, have played a crucial role in Morocco's balance of payments. They are said to almost offset its trade deficit and have increased its balance of payment surpluses.

In an effort to strike some deal with Morocco over immigration, Spain's foreign minister, Miguel Angel

Moratinos, had said, "We would like to promote with these neighbouring countries a strong and mutually beneficial relation that is capable of facing the challenges we confronting at the international level: terrorism, control of migration flows and the construction of a space of prosperity."

Yet for people trying to escape the grinding poverty and unemployment in Africa the reality differs fundamentally from Moratinos' flowery rhetoric of shared interests. Recently, a mother and her baby were among five people killed when their boat capsized trying to reach the Spanish coast. Out of 33 people on board the vessel, 26 are still missing. So far this year 47 people have died trying to reach Spain from Morocco.

Every year thousands of migrants risk their lives in an effort to cross the 20-kilometre Straits of Gibraltar to reach Spain. In one day last week police stopped one hundred people from reaching Spanish soil. Many migrants pay up to 1,000 euros per person for the crossing in inflatable rafts. Most crossings are made in summer due to the better weather conditions.

New research by a Dutch based refugee support group has said that over 4,500 refugees and migrants died last year trying to enter Europe, and that the most deadly way to enter was across the Mediterranean. Most of the 4,500 deaths occurred between Africa and Spain.

The International Centre for Migration Policy has estimated that 3,600 have died trying to reach Spain from Africa since 1997. This somewhat conservative figure has been confirmed by the Madrid government, which has also admitted that for every body found, another two people are likely to be dead.

For those who survive the perilous journey, conditions inside Spanish territory are appalling. *El Pais* reported that at the main refugee centre at Ceuta

where immigrants are detained whilst their claims for asylum are assessed; over 80 people have developed scabies. The 80 are part of a group of over 400 people forced to sleep in the open. Many immigrants are also forced to queue in the blazing sunshine for food and drinks provided by a religious charity. Due to the paltry level of financial resources provided by central government, if the charity runs out of money then large numbers of people will starve.

While some of the luckier refugees have been sheltered in basic accommodation, more than 1,000 are still waiting to be processed. Apart from living in the streets, many are forced to live in rubbish containers. If people put up temporary shelters these are immediately torn down by the army.

One church group assisting migrants has said it can no longer cope. “The situation is extremely delicate,” Father Francisco Correrro said. His church has spent 18,000 euros since March on food and shelter and has only 1,400 euros left. “I don’t even have enough to pay for cleaning,” he explained.

Immigration to Spain of any magnitude has been a recent phenomenon and can be traced back to the early 1990s. Foreigners in Spain constitute a small proportion of the population—just six percent, one of the smallest totals in Western Europe.

In 2003, four-fifths of the immigrants in Spain lived in 6 of its 17 regions. The figures on where immigrants in Spain came from break down as follows: 22 percent from Europe, 13 percent from Eastern Europe, 39 percent from Latin America and 20 percent from Africa.



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