

Britain: government treatment of Roma was racist, Law Lords rule

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20 December 2004

Britain's highest court of appeal has ruled that immigration procedures racially discriminated against Roma. One of the Law Lords, Lady Hale said that immigration officials had been "acting on racial grounds" by preventing Roma travelling to Britain from the Czech Republic.

In 2001, the Home Office began "pre-screening" passengers from the Czech Republic. With the agreement of the Czech government, British immigration officials were stationed at Prague airport, where they screened all passengers for the UK, preventing those they suspected might go on to lodge a claim for asylum from travelling. According to civil rights group Liberty, official statistics showed Roma were 400 times more likely to be stopped.

The "pre-screening" was abandoned after three weeks, following exposure of its blatant racist bias by several journalists. The Home Office said that some 110 people were prevented from travelling to the UK while the measures were in place, of which 60 were Roma.

Six Roma Czechs refused entry to Britain then took their case to the High Court in 2001, which upheld the racist procedures. The Law Lords ruling now overturns this judgement.

Sami Chakrabarti, Director of Liberty and Dimitrina Petrova, executive director of the European Roma Rights Centre said, "This ruling exposes the racism at the heart of the government's asylum policy. The message was absolutely clear: 'Roma not welcome in UK'".

Maeve Sherlock, chief executive of the Refugee Council said, "Human rights abuses against the Roma in Eastern Europe are well documented, and it is hugely troubling that the government sought to deny entry to such a vulnerable group."

At the time the screening procedures were introduced, the tabloid press was full of lurid stories about a "gypsy invasion". In typical fashion, the Labour government sought to reinforce its credentials for being "tough" on asylum by adopting the most reactionary immigration measures.

Since coming to office in 1997, New Labour has introduced increasingly harsher immigration rules. The disastrous "dispersal" policy forced those seeking asylum into a form of internal exile, without proper access to much needed support services. Refugees can be made to live in towns far away from their own community, in areas with few other immigrants, where they become easy scapegoats for the acute social problems that afflict many run-down estates. In October, dispersals to six areas of England were suspended at the request of the police, after a series of vicious attacks on asylum seekers.

Restrictive rules about lodging asylum applications means those who do not claim immediately upon their arrival are denied all forms of state benefits normally paid to refugees. A study by the Greater London Authority, "Destitution by Design", forecasts that approximately 14,000 asylum seekers will be made destitute each year as result of this policy.

Now, those whose applications for asylum is rejected are to be made to undertake compulsory unpaid community work while they await deportation. Labour's latest assault on refugees will force so-called "failed" asylum seekers to work for up to 35 hours a week in return for accommodation and minimal benefits.

Although the official guidance states that the elderly and infirm will be exempt, this is only on a "case-by-case basis".

Labour is expelling more refugees than any previous

Conservative government. According to Home Office figures, the number of forced removals has almost doubled from 6,990 in 1998, to over 13,000 in 2003. Over the same period, successful asylum appeals have increased from 9 to 20 percent. In other words, despite the increasingly draconian regulations they face, more refugees are having their asylum applications upheld, blowing apart the myth propagated by the government and the media about Britain being flooded with “bogus” asylum seekers.

Meanwhile, the government is expanding its facilities to lock up asylum seekers, with a further 1,000 places at detention centres planned. Those detained have committed no crime. Indeed, many are the victims of the most terrible crimes: their homes destroyed in wars and civil wars or tortured for their ethnicity.

Displaying Labour’s disdain for long-standing international legal conventions, in flagrant breach of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child prohibiting the detention of asylum seeking children, it is not only adult refugees that are incarcerated. There has been a six-fold increase in child detentions since figures were first published in November 2003. In June 2004, 60 asylum seeker children were detained in removal centres under immigration act powers.



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