

Germany begins deportations of Afghan refugees

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In May, the German city of Hamburg began to deport refugees back to Afghanistan, even though the security situation in that country has dramatically worsened in recent months and the economic and social conditions are desperate.

The deportation of the 58,000 Afghan refugees currently residing in Germany has long been on the agenda of the federal and state interior ministers. A decision had been expected following recent negotiations between the German interior ministry and the Afghan government. However, according to a report in the *Spiegel* weekly newsmagazine, the negotiations were aborted in March after the German government rejected the participation of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) in the deportations.

The German refugee organisation, Pro Asyl, wrote that the participation of the UNHCR would have meant that the refugees could only have been sent back on a voluntary basis. Germany, on the other hand, wanted to carry out mass deportations. In the end, the Afghan government gave only a half-hearted agreement to take back their citizens, so long as Germany sent them back at a slow pace.

Germany, however, took this as a green light to immediately start the deportations. With the approval of German Interior Minister Otto Schily (Social Democratic Party—SPD), the Hamburg senate has now taken the lead and initiated the first deportations. The interior ministers of the German states of Hessian, Bavaria and Baden-Württemberg have also signalled their intention to proceed with their own deportations.

In April, Udo Nagel (Christian Democratic Union—CDU), the Hamburg interior minister, went so far as to fly to Kabul for four days in order to pressure the Afghan government. After his return, Nagel declared: “The security situation in Afghanistan is stable. Many provinces are safe enough to return to.” Nagel also claimed that the Afghan refugee minister, Mohammad Azam Dadfar, “had no quarrels about the return of his countrymen.” Nagel proclaimed that all male refugees between 18 and 60, of independent standing, and who have been in Germany less than six years, should be sent back soon.

Nagel’s recollection of the discussions could hardly have been further from reality. When Dadfar was asked about the comments of the Hamburg interior minister, he told *Spiegel* magazine: “I expressly stated that we could not take any responsibility for them [the refugees].” He characterised the planned deportations as “counter-productive” and had asked Nagel to “abandon any such

plans.”

It was only after the conclusion of the recent negotiations that Dadfar declared he would be willing to accept 10-15 refugees per month from Hamburg. Nagel, however, wants to send between 5,600 and 15,000 back, and as quickly as possible, far beyond the agreed limit. The Hamburg CDU spokesman for interior affairs, Christoph Ahlhaus, made clear that the reservations of the Afghan government would have absolutely no influence on their decision. He declared: “Although we take note of their positions, we have to align our repatriation with our own legal position, and this is not dependent on the comments of third parties.”

As for the self-imposed criteria for the selection of deportees, the Hamburg immigration department has shown it is not going to adhere to them too closely. A 22-year-old man, Feridun Z., was deported even though he lived with his mother and brother and hence was in no way of “independent standing.” Since his deportation his brother has also been threatened with the same fate. Both brothers no longer have any relatives in Afghanistan. According to the Hamburg Refugee Council, their father was murdered two years ago in Herat.

The Hamburg immigration department is systematically placing enormous pressure on the Afghan refugees. They receive continuous extensions to remain in Germany for only a few days or weeks at a time, live in a constant state of insecurity, and are being forced to take advice about “voluntary” repatriation. Two Afghans reportedly have taken their own lives in order to avoid being deported.

Up until now, the Afghan refugees have often been able to avoid their forced “repatriation” at the last minute by using their legal right to apply for asylum, by petitioning for their right to residency, or by obtaining medical certificates that prove beyond any doubt that their deportation would represent a threat to life and limb. In the course of the first round of deportations the Hamburg interior minister was only able to expel two refugees. As a result, Nagel confronted hefty criticism from the ranks of his own party.

The Hamburg senate is now no longer willing to tolerate democratic rights originating with the 1951 Geneva Refugee Convention. Ahlhaus demanded that the interior ministry “no longer mess about and start to get on with deporting refugees.” Karl-Heinz Warnholz, another CDU senate member, demanded an immediate change to the right to asylum. He wants to deny war refugees the right to apply for asylum on the day of their planned deportation, the latter often occurring without any prior warning.

Udo Nagel, who was surrounded by bodyguards for the duration of his four-day visit, appraised the situation in Afghanistan as stable. The Afghan government and the German embassy ensured a comfortable stay for him, complete with air-conditioned accommodations. In contrast, deported refugees face a struggle for their very existence.

Nagel's assessment that the situation in Afghanistan is safe was contradicted by the recent announcement of German Defence Minister Peter Struck (SPD) that the German military contingent in the country would soon be expanded to 2,500 and its operational area significantly broadened. This measure is intended to support the puppet regime of Afghan President Hamid Karzai, whose authority scarcely exceeds the city limits of Kabul and who is militarily, politically and economically dependent on the Western powers.

After 25 years of civil war, Afghanistan ranks 173 out of a total of 178 countries on the United Nations development index. One out of five children die before reaching the age of five, half of the population suffers from chronic under-nourishment and only 25 percent have access to clean water. Average life expectancy is just 44.5 years.

Over the course of two decades of war, a total of 1.5 million people lost their lives, 300,000 of them children. Five million became refugees, most of them fleeing to Iran and Pakistan. In recent years, the population of the capital city Kabul has grown enormously. In 1988, 1.4 million people lived in the city; today there are around 3.5 million residents. The city's infrastructure, which was completely destroyed, cannot cope. Clean drinking water, health care facilities, work and accommodation are all desperately lacking.

The unemployment rate in Kabul is estimated at around 90 percent, and the average monthly income for a teacher or doctor is only US\$50. A simple apartment without water or electricity costs approximately US\$250 per month. Those without any relatives living in Kabul, like most of the refugees in Germany, are often forced to sleep on the streets. Many returned refugees live on the city outskirts in slum huts and crates. They receive no financial assistance either from the central government or from the United Nations. Even the German government has refused to offer assistance to deported refugees.

On top of this social misery is the tense security situation. In the countryside, there are an estimated 10 million landmines. The hatred toward American and international troops and against the Karzai puppet regime often takes the form of violent conflicts. The battles between government security forces and the militias of the regional warlords have again increased in ferocity. Paul Barker from Care International considered it a success that on the day of the presidential election last October, "only" 38 people were killed.

Even the German army (Bundeswehr) command in Afghanistan has referred to the problematic security situation. The German Foreign Ministry issued an acute travel warning for Afghanistan, stating that in Kabul, "shootings and violent crimes are often committed.... In other parts of the country the security risks are even higher. The security forces of the government are not in a position to guarantee order and stability throughout the country."

The department cynically adds (considering that the government is now deporting refugees): "The Foreign Ministry urgently recommends foreign travel medical insurance that includes travel back to Germany in case of injury or death."

Pro Asyl reports that in Kabul alone within the last year 160 children were kidnapped "for purposes of blackmail or forced recruitment, in other cases with the intention of removing organs for transplant purposes."

Even though the Karzai government has hardly any control over the areas outside Kabul, asylum applications from Afghan refugees are being rejected in bulk and their refugee status rescinded. These decisions are justified on the basis of "regime change." However, in spite of the change of government in Afghanistan, political persecution, undertaken by provincial rulers as well as the security forces of the Karzai government and the Western occupation troops, remain on the order of the day.

Considering this disastrous and life threatening situation in Afghanistan, it is a crime against human rights to deport Afghan refugees back to their homeland.

As a leader of the Pro Asyl group, Günter Burkhardt, correctly explained: "For every deported person who suffers in Afghanistan or, indeed, who dies, the German federal government is responsible, irrespective of the department responsible."

While Hamburg and other German states have already begun deportations, the next conference of state interior ministers is set to agree on changes to the right of residency for Afghan refugees who have lived in Germany for less than six years. The condition to be set is that they must have worked for at least the last two years and be earning an income that is sufficient to cover their living expenses.

This measure, when implemented, will threaten around 15,000 Afghan refugees with deportation. Many more thousands of refugees will also be threatened with deportation to rubble and despair for the "crimes" of being unemployed and receiving social welfare benefits.



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