

# Fire kills at least 11 at Amsterdam airport detention centre

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At least 11 people have died and 15 are in hospital, as a result of a three-hour blaze in a detention centre at Amsterdam's Schiphol airport in the early hours of Thursday, October 27. Police have said the death toll could rise.

Some 350 people were detained in the series of prefabricated buildings. Undocumented immigrants and asylum seekers whose appeals have been exhausted are kept alongside hundreds of drug smugglers—mainly cocaine “mules” from the Netherlands Antilles and other parts of the Caribbean—awaiting deportation.

Forty-three people were said to be in the wing that caught fire, which has two dozen one- or two-man cells. Ten or 12 of the cells were destroyed. The blaze broke out at midnight and was not extinguished until dawn. The cause of the fire is still unknown, but authorities have not ruled out arson.

Detainees describe horrific events. Several said that guards had initially ignored their warnings of a fire and their banging on the cell doors.

“First they said there was no problem, and they just kept us locked up,” one said.

Guards did not want to believe the inmates' alarm over the smoke, he explained, claiming that the authorities said there was nothing to be worried about.

“Our throats started hurting. We kicked, we screamed, we rang the bell, of course. And then panic broke out.”

“We remained locked inside. We were shouting at the top of our voices until we were hoarse,” said another.

The local mayor, Michel Bezuijen, said the 11 who died were detainees, but their nationalities and identities have not been made public. The 15 injured include 6 detainees, 6 police officers, 2 security guards and an official in charge of the centre. Four remain hospitalised and one is in a serious condition.

The Dutch National Refugee Council criticised conditions at the centre, particularly the lack of an automatic system to open cell doors. Martin Bruinsma of the prosecutors' office told the media that cell doors could be opened only manually, one at a time.

Helicopters were being used to search for an estimated eight detainees who are believed to have escaped from the centre. Police said three were arrested while trying to escape. Some of the detainees have been transferred to other detention centres. Others were transferred to a nearby prison outside the city of Utrecht. The blaze was the second to erupt at the Schiphol detention centre, the first occurring in 2002 shortly after it was opened.

Dutch Prime Minister Jan Peter Balkenende has promised that an independent inquiry will be set up, as well as the regular judicial inquiry. A European prisoners' rights group, EORG, said it will also mount an investigation. A spokesman for the group commented, “The way the fire spread quickly from one cell to another gives rise to questions.”

Mayor Bezuijen told reporters, “We will appoint a third party to carry out an independent investigation into what happened, not just how the fire started, but also [whether] the safety measures were adequate and so on.”

The horrific deaths at the centre are ultimately the product of the xenophobic anti-immigrant policies pursued by the Netherlands, where the centre-right government that came to power three years ago is in the process of deporting 26,000 asylum seekers who have been refused the right to stay.

In May 2002, the assassination of the right-wing populist politician Pim Fortuyn helped create the conditions for the electoral victory of the Christian Democrats, who, together with Fortuyn's party and the

People's Party for Liberty and Democracy, scapegoated immigrants to divert attention from the mounting social crisis in the Netherlands.

The government pledged to "fight against the inflow of immigrants" with strict border controls and by refusing incoming refugees without identification the right to apply for asylum. Illegal residency was made a criminal offence, and a special police force was set up to seize and deport foreigners or rejected asylum-seekers.

In February 2004, parliament voted to expel some 26,000 asylum seekers from the Netherlands over the following three years. The measure affected Afghans, Somalis and Chechens facing return to regions beset by civil wars or with no functioning government.

Many had been in the country for more than five years and had children who were raised in the Netherlands. Deportation centres were opened up for the detention of families. Those refusing to leave were threatened with a six-month prison sentence and the loss of any entitlement to a job, welfare, housing or health care. The latter measure was intended to force people to leave "voluntarily" and thereby satisfy international human rights conventions.

Civil rights groups have warned that people face expulsion to countries where they could be tortured or killed, in contravention of international law.

In 2004, Human Rights Watch wrote an open letter to the Dutch immigration minister opposing the denial of residence eligibility and social assistance to the failed asylum seekers. It stated, "Human Rights Watch is deeply concerned that some of the people subject to the planned deportations may be at risk of return to a country or a part of a country where their lives or freedom would be threatened.... We understand that Afghans and Somalis are among the groups subject to the deportation proposals. It has been widely recognised that returns to these countries at present could place people at risk for their lives and safety."

The letter went on to note, "Among the thousands of people threatened with deportation under the proposals, children comprise a significant proportion.... States have a positive obligation to protect all children within their jurisdiction against abuse, neglect, and exploitation and to ensure that children enjoy an adequate standard of living for their physical, mental, spiritual, moral, and social development."

The dangerous and degrading conditions in which asylum seekers, undocumented immigrants and the often desperate individuals caught up in the drugs trade were kept at Schiphol airport are part and parcel of these vicious and undemocratic measures.



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