

Spain: Government seeks European clampdown on Canary Islands boat people

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The Spanish Socialist Workers Party (PSOE) government is answering the plight of the impoverished boat people sailing from Africa to the Canary Islands with more repressive measures. Prime Minister José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero's government is demanding the European Union (EU) help increase surveillance and naval patrols to intercept the boat people and pressuring African leaders to agree to their repatriation.

The Canary Islands have been the destination this year for around 24,000 undocumented workers, including nearly 1,000 children. These come mainly from West African and sub-Saharan countries such as Senegal and Mali, but some come from as far away as India, Pakistan and the Far East. It is a measure of people's desperation and the difficulty of entering "Fortress Europe" that such perilous journeys are undertaken.

Many of those attempting the crossing have already endured terrifying 2,400-mile trips, travelling up to two years to escape from civil wars, dictatorships, drought and famine only to be beaten by border guards, threatened with drowning and then forcibly repatriated. Human rights organisations have described this policy as a breach of the Geneva Convention on the treatment of refugees.

Rescue workers estimate that some 550 people have died attempting to sail to the Canary Islands this year. Just this week, survivors picked up by a merchant vessel after their flimsy boat broke apart said 20 of their companions had drowned. Many of the boats attempting the crossing are unsafe and overcrowded. Suspicions abound that Spanish naval security has ignored boats in distress despite having some of the most advanced radar systems in the world.

Although media reports focus on the fact that the numbers of undocumented workers reaching the Canary Islands this year exceeds the 4,751 for the whole of last year, the figure is well below the tens of thousands from Africa who entered Spain in recent years along alternate routes that have gradually been sealed off by fences, border guards and coastal patrols.

Last year, the PSOE government ordered the construction

of a militarised 15-metre-high razor wire fence around the Spanish enclaves of Ceuta and Melilla in North Africa, and increased radar installations and surveillance satellites along Spain's southern coast to detect and turn back anyone trying to sail across the narrow seas that separate Spain from Morocco and Algeria. These measures and the strengthened border patrols carried out by both African countries after pressure from Spain and the EU have forced migrants to set sail from Mauritania and Senegal—countries further south.

To stop sailings from these countries, Spain pressured their governments to agree to joint border patrols, which Deputy Prime Minister Teresa de la Vega claims has prevented the departure of 10,000 migrants over the last few weeks.

However, as Mohamed Chegali of the Mauritanian Red Cross explained, recently increased patrols around the ports of Nouakchott and Noudhibou in his country are forcing people to take much greater risks—launching their canoes at night and heading further out into rougher international waters where, in theory, they cannot be ordered back. In addition, more sailings are taking place even further south—from Gambia and Guinea-Bissau.

De la Vega is now putting pressure on countries to sign and enforce agreements that allow a limited number of migrant visas (often for members of the ruling elite and government officials) in return for derisory amounts of aid. She has repeated warnings that African countries must take back their repatriated citizens.

The Spanish government has bullied Senegalese President Abdoulaye Wade to treat workers who try to get to Spain as criminals and jail them. Senegal has already accepted back 2,400 of its citizens deported from Spain in the last month and has agreed to further talks.

Spain's interior minister, Alfredo Pérez Rubalcaba, openly boasts of his party's success with the deportations—the first since 1996, when the practice was stopped under the right-wing Popular Party (PP) administration.

There has been huge opposition to the deportations in Senegal, and the issue has become a central question in elections due in February 2007. "To believe you're in

Europe, it's a miracle for most Senegalese," said Massaer Niang, a student who spent eight months and 2,500 euros trying to get to the Canary Islands. "Imagine returning them to Senegal. It's a psychological catastrophe. They've risked their lives, spent their money, they're ashamed, reduced to nothing," he added.

This week, officials from Guinea and Gambia have agreed to identify their citizens in the reception camps on the Canary Islands and to take them back when they are deported, in return for each country receiving aid amounting to 5 million euros (US\$6.1 million).

The repressive measures implemented by Zapatero and his ministers are not just the result of domestic pressure. A chorus of right-wing European politicians and EU ministers led by French Interior Minister Nicolas Sarkozy have blamed the boat people tragedy on the amnesty the PSOE declared last year for nearly 800,000 undocumented workers (most of whom are actually from Latin and South America).

At the time, the PSOE justified the measure, saying it would increase tax revenues, help combat people trafficking and enable more concentrated efforts to be made against illegal immigration. Little was said about the most important function that these workers performed for Spain's ruling elite—serving as a cheap labour source that enables Spain's booming construction and agricultural industries to reap windfall profits.

In addition, the amnesty leaves hundred of thousands of undocumented workers who did not meet the criteria in dire straits. They remain in a legal limbo without work papers or jobs, unable to pay rent or sleeping rough on the streets.

One typical case is Abdul, who made a life-threatening trip from Mali after paying up to a year's wages to fund the journey, and now spends his time walking the streets of Madrid looking for casual work and sleeping under a hedge. When he has money, he uses the public toilet to get a wash and change his clothes, which he carries around in a plastic bag. If this existence is not bad enough, many immigrants face racist attacks, which the anti-racism group SOS Racismo says the government has done nothing to alleviate.

Last month in Madrid, Sarkozy turned up late to a conference of eight EU member states bordering the Mediterranean Sea (Cyprus, France, Greece, Italy, Malta, Portugal, Slovenia and Spain) hosted by Zapatero. The Spanish government had hoped to pressure EU ministers to hand over money promised earlier in the year for the European Frontex border security agency. To date, only Spain, Finland, Italy and Portugal have contributed, leaving the PSOE complaining that the force can hardly function with only two patrol boats and two helicopters to patrol thousands of square miles of sea.

Instead, Sarkozy launched into another attack on

Zapatero's amnesty, declaring, "Normalisations are not a solution. Massive normalisations have a counter-effect. France had an experience following the massive normalisation of illegal immigrants in 1997 which caused an explosion in asylum seekers' requests."

Sarkozy added, "We can't all continue to have our own immigration policies.... We can only solve the problems of immigration through complete coordination with our European partners." He called for increasing the powers of the EU to ban amnesties, organise repatriations, and centralise the handling of asylum applications and visas—proposals he intends to pursue at an informal EU summit in the Finnish city of Lahti on October 20.

Zapatero replied to Sarkozy's comments by saying the French government was not in a position "to give Spain any lessons" on immigration policy. "I do not accept what the French interior minister might have to say, after what we saw in the neighbourhoods of Paris," Zapatero said, referring to last November's riots in France's suburbs.

However, Spanish ministers have indicated that the PSOE's immigration policy will shift further to the right as a result of the pressure from right-wing elements in the EU such as Sarkozy—just as it has done under pressure from Spain's Popular Party (PP).

The PSOE government has already promised not to consider any more amnesties without agreement with the EU and declared it will put a stop to further "illegal immigration." It has pledged that "sooner or later" all undocumented workers will be deported to their countries of origin. It is also looking to agree on a common immigration policy with the PP, whose spokeswoman for social affairs, Ann Pastor, praised its actions, while warning that "this is not enough for the PP."



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