

UK government steps up assault on asylum-seekers

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The British Labour government is ratcheting up the pressure on asylum-seekers and refugees in Britain. Deportations are being pursued regardless of the consequences for the deportees. This policy reflects an increasingly belligerent government attitude towards refugees.

Some cases recently highlighted include:

* Two 18-year-old Jewish sisters, Kamila and Karina Kaya, who are currently being held at the Yarl's Wood detention centre. They had fled Kyrgyzstan in 2003 after their parents had been killed (murder is suspected). The twins, who had settled in Birmingham, were doing well at college and hoping to become doctors. According to the National Coalition of Anti-Deportation Campaigns (NCADC), they have been given a temporary reprieve subject to a juridical review. They are, however, still held at Yarl's Wood and according to friends and supporters showing signs of extreme distress.

* Two Algerian men recently sent back to Algeria. Amnesty International (AI), the human rights group, has raised concerns for their safety. They had been held in custody in Britain from 2001 to 2004 under the anti-terrorism act. They were never charged and were released after the Law Lords (Britain's supreme court) ruled that detention without trial was illegal. After release, they were subject to close supervision. On arrival in Algeria, the men were arrested by the Algerian military police, the DRS. The British director of AI, Kate Allen, said, "We are deeply concerned about that these men are at risk of torture.... [T]hese men have been labelled 'suspected international terrorists' by the UK authorities, they were always at risk of torture and should have never been returned to Algeria."

* Alnour Yousif Fasher was due to be deported back to Darfur in Sudan on January 22. Fasher, from a prominent family, is a member of the Justice and Equality Movement (JEM) opposed to the Sudanese government. The government plans to send back other refugees from Darfur in the Sudan. Their applications for asylum have been rejected by the British Home Office. Dr. James Smith, executive director of the Aegis Trust (which campaigns against genocide), explained, "The sending back of Darfuris to Sudan is dangerous and misguided. Alnour is at particular risk.... By telling such people they can return to Khartoum, the city where the organisers of the atrocities are still operating, Britain is becoming part of the thread of brutality in Darfur."

* The case of a Sibtain Bokhari, a human rights lawyer originally from Pakistan who had settled in Grimsby, was taken up by local

MP Austin Mitchell. Writing in the *Independent* newspaper February 1, Mitchell described how Bokhari and his family had been deported back to Lahore.

Bokhari, a Shia, had lived in a Sunni-dominated area in Lahore. After attending a rights conference in Britain in 2001, he became the subject of attacks and intimidation on his return to Lahore and was branded a stooge of Tony Blair. He fled to Britain in 2003 and applied for asylum. He settled in Grimsby with his wife and four children, who all went to school locally. The family's application for asylum was turned down, and in June 2005, the family was arrested prior to deportation. Mitchell then intervened on the family's behalf and was able to get the case reconsidered. The MP describes how his representations to the Home Office immigration ministers led nowhere. The family was eventually deported at the end of January this year.

Mitchell wrote, "It leaves a nasty taste. An out-of-control Immigration and Nationality Directorate is doing what it wants to get deportations up. The minister goes along, ratifies its decisions (he hardly ever rejects them), observes its deadlines and strings MPs along, pretending to listen while doing nothing.... I feel ashamed."

Mitchell's response is indicative of the extent to which the official political agenda has shifted to the right. The normal mechanisms by which certain democratic constraints were exercised on government have atrophied. His recognition that the Immigration and Nationality Directorate is, in his own words, "out-of control" points to the alarming extent to which the Blair government is resorting to administrative measures that seriously erode democratic rights.

Many asylum-seekers never come to public attention. The full extent of the government's campaign is obscured. Under recent legislation, asylum-seekers must now apply immediately on entry to the country. This reduces the likelihood of them receiving legal representation to put their case. As a result, 19 out of 20 applications are rejected. Of those who appeal, only 20 percent are successful.

Failed asylum-seekers face deportation at the rate of one every 27 minutes.

According to official government figures, 15,685 failed asylum-seekers were removed from the country in 2005, an increase of 5 percent over 2004. This is in spite of the fact that the number of applications received in 2005 was 24 percent fewer than in 2004.

"The asylum system is unjust from beginning to end," Anna

Reisenberger, acting chief executive at the Refugee Council in Britain, told the *Independent*. “Too many people are refused protection because of poor initial decision making, an inadequate appeals system and a chronic lack of legal representation. In a desperate attempt to increase the numbers of removals, the officials go after soft targets.”

The pressure is on to maintain the pace of deportations. Whole groups of people are now being rounded up and deported en masse. Large numbers of Iraqi and Kurdish asylum-seekers have been held in detention centres throughout the country. A Home Office spokeswoman told the *Observer* that the intention was to fly them forcibly to the Kurdish region of northern Iraq in February.

A Refugee Council spokeswoman condemned the deportations. Stating that even though the northern region of Iraq was less dangerous than Baghdad, she added that, nevertheless, “It is a dangerous place; there is no rule of law.”

The United Nations refugee agency (UNHCR) said only voluntary returnees should be sent. In a statement, it noted Iraq is “still extremely unstable and dangerous, characterised by a general lack of law and order and the erratic provision of basic services.”

The National Coalition of Anti-Deportation Campaigns web site reports that a further charter flight was scheduled for February 12. They add, “At the moment immigration are rounding up as many failed Iraqi/Kurd asylum-seekers as possible.... Regardless of the fact, that at the moment Iraq is in free-fall to destruction.”

Refugees rounded up in this way are subjected to a traumatic experience. Detention is source of intense emotional stress. The National Coalition of Anti-Deportation Campaigns reported government figures showing that in November of last year, 160 detainees required medical attention for self-harming.

No group is off limits as the British government develops its hard line against immigrants and asylum-seekers. African refugees who are HIV-positive have been deported back to Africa to face death due to lack of antiretroviral drugs in their home countries. A December 2006 report by the AIDS charity Cruaid dismisses claims of “health tourism” in respect to people seeking treatment for HIV in Britain. Its report notes there is no evidence of such a phenomenon. It cites evidence gathered by the George House Trust and the Terrence Higgins Trust that show most asylum-seekers and refugees arriving in Britain are unaware of their HIV status until they have been in the country for several months. Lisa Power of the Terrence Higgins Trust accused the government of sending people back to their deaths.

The British government is now planning to deport child asylum-seekers. Home Secretary John Reid was forced to admit that government policy “did not strike the right balance” after the High Court ruled that it was detaining scores of children and young people unlawfully. Children as young as 14 years of age have been imprisoned in detention centres, alongside adults. The High Court heard that some of the children have suffered serious psychological damage because of their inappropriate treatment.

Mark Scott, a lawyer for one of the children, said, “Some of them have been detained for long periods of time—the longest we know of being 87 days.”

At least 100 similar cases are expected to be brought before the

courts in the next months as the Immigration and Nationality Directorate begin to send children back to Vietnam. A second wave of expulsions is planned for child refugees from Angola and the Democratic Republic of Congo. Around 3,000 unaccompanied children arrive in Britain each year from war-torn regions of the world to seek asylum.

Under the Geneva Convention on Human Rights, governments are obliged to admit unaccompanied children seeking asylum. Increasingly the UK government has overridden international law. It has become routine for young people to be detained and deported once they reach the age of 18, as in the case of the Kaya twins. They face return to a country of which they know little, may not even speak the language and have no surviving family or friends to help them.

Now, even those under 18 are at risk. It has been the practice for local authorities to find foster families for such children in the past. But the government now plans a fundamental shake-up of the system, which will cut off the funding for this highly vulnerable group of children. Like many adult asylum-seekers, they will increasingly find themselves dependent on charitable handouts as official funding is snatched away. Charities working with asylum-seekers report increasing numbers of refugees living on the street in complete destitution.

The UK government is pursuing its campaign against immigrants and asylum-seekers regardless of the human consequences. It is deaf to political representations, even from its own MPs, and contemptuous of warnings from charities and human rights organisations. Insofar as it has to respond to court rulings, it does so reluctantly and only until it can find a way of circumventing the law or changing it.

The Labour government is hell-bent on a policy that will lead to the deaths of some of the most vulnerable people in society. It is a policy that is the domestic counterpart of its war drive abroad. Many of the people being deported are the victims of wars, civil strife and instability that the UK has played its part in fomenting. Coming to Britain in search of refuge, they find themselves being made scapegoats for the inadequacy of the education system, the health service and welfare provision in Britain.

The government needs such scapegoats precisely because it is impossible to pursue an aggressive foreign policy and at the same time preserve the social conditions of the mass of the British population.



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