

# Brutal French government policy on undocumented immigrants leads to tragedy

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A 12-year-old boy fell from a balcony August 9 while trying to escape with his father from a police raid on their fourth-floor flat in Amiens, 120 kilometres north of Paris. Five days later, Ivan, from a Chechen refugee family, remains in a coma in the hospital being treated for severe head and other injuries.

The tragic episode produced a wave of shock and revulsion throughout the country against the methods being employed by the government against *sans papiers* (undocumented immigrants). The morning after the accident, some 300 people demonstrated through Amiens, marching from the Pigeonniers council estate, where the family lives, to the hospital. They carried placards saying, “Mr Police Chief (*préfet*) stop the round-ups,” “No to the hunting down of children and parents,” “Sarkozy’s laws kill rights.”

The immigrant rights support group *France terre d’asile* pointed to the inevitability of such tragedies, given the intensified effort to hound undocumented immigrants undertaken by the newly-elected Gaullist UMP (Union for a Popular Movement) government’s minister for immigration and national identity, Brice Hortefeux, a close friend and long-time collaborator of President Nicolas Sarkozy. The group declared, “We all knew that such a policy of the systematic hunting down [of *sans papiers*] could only lead to tragedies. The one in Amiens, where young Ivan is between life and death ... is unfortunately not the first. It will not be the last if this policy continues.”

Ivan’s mother, Natalia Dembski, is Chechen, and his father, Andreï Dembski, is Ukrainian. They left Grozny, the Chechen capital devastated by the Russian military, in 1995. Since February 2005, six months after the Dembskis’ arrival in France, they have made several requests for political asylum and residence permits, all of which have been refused. Ivan had been at school in France for two years and, according to his teachers, had

been doing brilliantly.

Sylvette Chevalier, who assists several *sans papiers* families on the Pigeonniers estate, told the press that the family had requested a re-examination of their case (*recours gracieux*): “We sent a letter a month ago, but there has been no reply. On Monday Natalia went with Ivan to the police station. The police told her to come back with her husband. They gave her no explanations, but she guessed that it would be risky to go back” They feared, justifiably, that they might be arrested at the police station and deported back to their country of origin.

The panic felt by the family when they saw numerous police vehicles drawn up outside their building and heard loud banging at their door, as well as the desperate attempt to escape arrest, reflects the climate of fear consciously being generated by the new Sarkozy government.

Thérèse Couraud, a 74-year-old former nurse active in the Amiens *sans papiers* support movement, explained, “The hunting down of people makes them afraid ... Some prefer to die by jumping out of the window rather than to be tortured on returning to their country of origin. This week three others received letters asking them to present themselves at the [police] *préfecture*, without indicating what for. After that we know they are locked up. We tell them not to show up, we take them under our protection.”

Thérèse continued, “It really gives a gloomy picture of France I was seven in 1940 and the situation with these families brings to mind, for me, the round-ups during the war”. She uses the word *rafles*, the same word used to refer to the mass arrests of Jews by the collaborationist police of the Vichy regime of Marshal Philippe Pétain during the Nazi occupation.

The immigrant support organisation CIMADE reported, “You now have massive systematic checks at certain places which evoke round-ups [*rafles*].” Brigitte Weiser of *Réseau d’éducation sans frontières* (RESF—Education

without Borders Network) told the press that in Paris, “The prefecture has clearly decided to go up a gear. They are taking advantage of the summer season: the schools would certainly be on strike right now.”

RESF, which is conducting a campaign in defence of victims of the offensive against *sans papiers*, issued a statement placing the blame for the accident on the government: “It is not an accident. It is the direct and ineluctable result of the policy imposed on the *préfectures* and the police by the government. The law enforcement agencies are subjected to quotas for arrests (125,000 demanded by the minister) and deportations (25,000).”

The statement stresses, “Yes, the *sans papiers* are hounded by the police,” even in their homes. It continues, “Other tragedies, less spectacular, are happening all over France: as we write, 10 parents (fathers or mothers) of children enrolled in schools are being held in detention centres by the Paris police, awaiting deportation,” and affirms that this is only the tip of the iceberg. “The deportations and the methods the police are using against our neighbours must stop,” the statement urges.

The intensification of the crackdown on *sans papiers* has been facilitated by Sarkozy’s filthy manoeuvre last summer in the face of a mass movement against the deportations and harassment of these families. As minister of interior, he declared a moratorium for families with children enrolled in schools and promised that over the summer holidays six to seven thousand families fulfilling certain criteria would be granted legal status. Some 30,000 applicants thought that they met the conditions and thus revealed their whereabouts to the authorities. Subsequently, 23,000 requests were refused, despite the fact that many fully met the stated criteria.

Hortefeux has denied any increased action against illegal immigrants during the summer months. However, his spokesperson admitted that a meeting of administrative departments had been held “on questions of procedure” at the beginning of July, while denying the existence of any written directives. But a government document obtained by the daily *Libération* recommends that the police proceed to checking on undocumented families at their homes and asks “the public prosecutor for coercion” in the case “of failure to appear” by people summoned.

The document also insisted on the inclusion of undocumented immigrants on the FPR, the Wanted Persons List. Immigrants rights organisations point out that whereas police incursions into *sans papiers*’ homes used to be exceptional, Hortefeux’s recommendations

have made them commonplace. The vice president of the *Syndicat des Magistrats*, the magistrates union, Jean-François Zmirou, commented, “I find it particularly disturbing that prosecuting magistrates be used like this by the Ministry of the Interior to serve its political programme.”

While the sincerity and concern of the public against the witch-hunting of illegal immigrants is unquestionable, the role of the “left” parties must be noted. Under the Plural Left government of Lionel Jospin, a coalition of the Socialist Party (PS), the Communist Party and the Greens, 12,000 *sans papiers* were deported annually (according to a *Libération* editorial August 11).

The 2007 Socialist Party presidential election programme included strong anti-immigrant measures: “We will carry out a policy of firmness concerning illegal immigration ... Consequently we must dissuade illegal immigration.” When PS candidate Ségolène Royal made a demagogic gesture in favour of *sans papiers* children during her election campaign, she was obliged to recant within hours. (See “France: Police attack defenders of immigrant school children”).

The only political figure who participated in Friday’s demonstration in Amiens was Francis Lec, a Socialist Party lawyer and regional councillor for Picardy, who acts for RESF in the Somme department. Lec is demanding the full legalisation of Ivan and his parents and full support for them by the social services, pointing out that Hortefeux’s “humanitarian” gesture of allowing the Dembskis to stay for six months while their son recovers is a cynical refusal to recognise that Ivan’s injuries will require medical attention for years. However, in his statement reported in the press, Lec proposes no political campaign against the anti-immigrant policies pursued by the entire French ruling elite.



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