

# French immigration policy and the death of Baba Traoré

Senthooran Ravee  
25 April 2008

On April 5, Baba Traoré, an undocumented, 29-year-old Malian immigrant in France, died of a heart attack after jumping into the Marne River while trying to escape a police control at Joinville-le-Pont station.

Traoré arrived in France in 2004 to give a kidney to his sister, who is 40 this year and lives in France after marrying a Frenchman. Professor Christophe Legendre, a leading practitioner of kidney transplantation at the Necker Hospital in Paris, had requested that Traoré come to France for the transplant. A bachelor, Traoré lived with his sister and worked for cleaning and maintenance agencies. His authorization for residency expired in 2007 and his request for its renewal, which he had asked for on medical grounds, was denied.

In an interview with Radio-J, government spokesman Luc Chatel called the event a “tragedy,” but quickly added that “a citizen who is following the law submits to police controls.”

Chatel continued: “My thoughts go out to the family of this young man; it’s a tragedy that affects all of us. But I would like to relate the facts: it was as he tried to escape a control by railway police that this young Malian ran away, that he had an unfortunate fall, and that he drowned.”

In the final analysis, however, Traoré’s tragic death is not a chance event due to an “unfortunate fall,” but the result of the electoral calculations and state policy of the current French government.

President Nicolas Sarkozy won the May 2007 presidential elections partially on the basis of his appeal to the far-right, anti-immigrant vote—a theme that he sounded again in trips to France’s Mediterranean coast during the March 2008 local elections.

Shortly after coming to power, Sarkozy named his collaborator, Brice Hortefeux, Minister of Immigration, National Identity, and Co-development. In a June 1,

2007 article in the conservative daily *Le Figaro*, Hortefeux announced that the government was fixing a number of 25,000 illegal immigrants, which local authorities would be required to find and deport. He said, “We will remain very firm: the objective for 2007 is 25,000 deportations. Undocumented aliens have no claim to remain in France, but rather should be brought back to their country of origin, voluntarily or by force.”

It soon became clear that local authorities could not find 25,000 illegal immigrants to deport—highlighting the arbitrary, politically motivated character of the numerical targets set by Sarkozy and Hortefeux. In early September, Hortefeux invited 19 local prefects to the Ministry of Immigration to criticize them for not meeting their deportation targets.

One police union official, Joaquin Masanet of UNSA-Police, told the daily *Libération*: “We have to be careful about all this pressure on the local prefects, which risks coming down the police hierarchy. Public service workers aren’t there to examine everyone. We’re not going to put a policeman on every block, in each restaurant or each company to come up with numbers to meet expulsion targets.”

By that point, however, police raids were already taking a deadly toll on undocumented immigrants. Twelve-year-old Ivan in Amiens was left in a coma on August 10 after falling from a fourth-story window while trying to evade immigration police. Also in August, 24-year-old Tarek jumped out of a high-rise building to escape police in Toulouse. A Chinese immigrant, Chunlan Liu, jumped to her death on September 20, 2007, trying to escape police in downtown Paris.

On February 15, 2008, Kenyan immigrant and athlete John Maïna, who feared torture should he be expelled back to Kenya, committed suicide upon learning that

his request for asylum had been definitively rejected.

Ultimately, 21,000 immigrants were expelled from France in 2007. Held in overcrowded detention centers, immigrants have held protests and hunger strikes to publicize the terrible conditions there. On April 17, five policemen were briefly held at the General Inspectorate of Services (IGS) for questioning of their conduct during a February 11 protest by immigrants held at the Vincennes retention center. According to the daily *Le Monde*, “They used electroshock pistols and were filmed by surveillance cameras. Prisoners were hospitalized after this intervention.”

A study by the Cimade humanitarian organization, quoted by *Le Monde*, found that 35,000 immigrants had been placed in collective detention centers in 2007. It found that immigrants had five days in which to request asylum, but were required to fill out asylum forms even though they were denied tables or pens on the pretext that they might be used as weapons. Among the immigrants held in the detention centers were 242 children, even though French law shields them from these deportation procedures. Last year, one immigrant committed suicide in a Bordeaux detention center, and two detainees attempted suicide by self-immolation in Lyon.

More perceptive figures in the French ruling class, while questioning Sarkozy’s whipping up of right-wing sentiment through anti-immigrant policies, have expressed concern that this agenda will ultimately provoke widespread revulsion in the working class. In September, former Prime Minister Dominique de Villepin worried that other countries where similar policies were being carried out had not “gone through the round-ups [*les rafles*]” of Jews during the Nazi Occupation of France, when French police followed orders from the SS and Gestapo to find Jews living in France to deport to Nazi extermination camps.

Baba Traoré’s death led to a wave of demonstrations and protests. On April 5, 6, and 12, hundreds of people marched in Joinville-le-Pont, including Nagnouma Komé, Traoré’s sister, who told the press she “couldn’t understand” the circumstances of her brother’s death. She added, “Baba could have been saved, the police could have dived in to rescue him, but they didn’t want to save Baba, who didn’t know how to swim and was afraid of water.”

Bahija Benkouka, who coordinates a pro-

undocumented immigrant alliance, the *9e Collectif des sans-papiers*, told AFP, “The anti-immigrant manhunt has human tragedy as its consequences, and it risks continuing if Sarkozy goes in the same direction. Regularizing immigrants’ situation is the only just and humane solution.”

Other pro-immigrant associations expressed their opposition to government policy. Nathalie Serré, spokeswoman for the UCIJ (United against a Disposable Immigration) group, said, “Events show unfortunately that government policy kills, and we want to stress this now, when in three months France will want to impose its policy on the entire European Union,” when France takes on the EU’s rotating presidency.

The Movement against Racism and for Friendship between Peoples (MRAP) issued a statement saying, “After these repeated tragedies, and with the risk of further ones, it is absolutely urgent to put an end to the manhunts for undocumented immigrants by an immediate end to all expulsions.”

Shortly after Traoré’s death, on April 15, hundreds of undocumented workers began ongoing strikes in restaurants, cleaning, and security firms. Without recourse to the courts to force employers to grant regular pay and social benefits, these immigrants are among the most exploited layers of the working class.

According to a report in *Le Monde*, the British Council and the Migration Policy Group recently released a report on conditions for immigrants throughout Europe. *Le Monde* writes, “According to the six criteria studied—access to work, family regroupment, long-term stay, political participation, access to citizenship, and non-discrimination—France ranks 11th.... Citizens of other countries residing legally in France must satisfy the most stringent conditions of the 28 [European] countries for family regroupment and long-term residency.”



To contact the WSWs and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

**[wsws.org/contact](http://wsws.org/contact)**