

France: Sarkozy escalates anti-immigrant campaign

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French President Nicolas Sarkozy's minister of immigration and national identity, Eric Besson, announced Sunday October 25 a proposal for a nationwide, state-organised debate on "national identity." The announcement comes after a month of unprecedented assaults on migrants and refugees, notably Afghans fleeing war, persecution and deprivation.

These measures are part of a government campaign to foment a national-chauvinist climate in the country. They are seen by many commentators as an attempt to divert attention from the government's mounting difficulties in dealing with the economic, social and political impact of the global financial crisis on France and Europe. They signal a significant lurch to the right in the French political establishment.

Besson, a former Socialist Party leader who went over to Sarkozy in the run-up to the 2007 presidential elections, came to national prominence and provoked a wave of revulsion September 22, when he ordered and supervised the brutal eviction of Afghan migrants from their camp, the "Jungle", in Calais. His October 22 decision to forcibly repatriate three young Afghan refugees, claiming that they were being sent to "safe" areas, raised even greater concern. This was a joint operation with the British authorities who expelled 24 other Afghan immigrants on the same chartered flight.

Besson, cynically, claimed "there was no risk" for the three Afghans aged 18, 19 and 22 in returning to the Kabul region. The aim, he asserted, was to send a "signal" to the illegal traffickers. "We are tackling the logic of a traffic which is odious. France is today the target of traffickers. It's a sort of hideout as we have not sent Afghans back for a few months, whereas Britain (over 300), Norway (100), Germany, Sweden, and Holland (about 10 each) have." Despite widespread condemnations that have even come from within the ruling UMP (Union for a Popular Movement), he has insisted that he will continue to carry out "grouped repatriations" to Afghanistan.

The round-up of Afghan migrants is the tip of the iceberg of the daily police sweeps throughout France to meet the 2009 target of expelling 27,000 undocumented immigrants, *sans-papiers*, up from 25,000 last year. Besson has been proud to announce that with 21,000 already deported he is confident that the quota will be met.

President Sarkozy commented that this was not only a message to the "traffickers" but to the "economic migrants" who are not "real asylum seekers". At present, another 40 Afghans are

awaiting their fate at detention centres in Lille, Paris, Coquelles (near Calais) and Nice. Eleven of them have started a hunger strike.

According to Caroline Larpin, the lawyer for the Cimade organization, which oversees the welfare of detained undocumented immigrants, a note found the next morning, written by two of the three expelled Afghans, described the dangers awaiting them back in Kabul. "The one incarcerated at the Vincennes immigration detention centre explained that all his family were refugees in Iran, because his uncle was imprisoned and then shot in Afghanistan and his brother wounded by gunshots. The other feared a return because his father was killed by the Taliban and his region was under Taliban control."

Reuters reported October 26: "Two of the expelled Afghans, lodged at France's expense in a hotel [in Kabul], spoke of their situation in a report broadcast on Sunday evening on France 2. They consider that their security cannot be guaranteed anywhere in their country." Weheen Salim said, "I'm not happy to be alive. There's nowhere for me in the world. My mother told me to go to Europe. In France they didn't want me."

Nik Khan reported having been arrested in the "Jungle" in Calais, without being allowed to take his clothes, his MP3 player or his bag with him. "I can't stay here. There are Taliban and fighting... My family is under threat from the Taliban, I've got to leave the country."

The France 2 report then showed an employee of the French embassy who had come to give 2,000 euros in cash to each of the deportees. Nik Khan said they would serve for him to set off again for France.

According to the UN High Commission for Refugees (HRC), a total of 185,000 requests for asylum were made in industrialised countries between January and June due to the worsening security situation in countries like Afghanistan and Somalia. In the first six months of the year, there has been an 80 percent increase of Afghans asking for asylum. Overall, 12,000 Afghans and 11,000 Somalis are asking for asylum in 40 countries. Iraqis, however, are still the most numerous among those fleeing combat zones and the effects of Western imperialist aggression.

France has 3,500 troops participating in the colonial-style war in Afghanistan, Eric Besson reacted to complaints by humanitarian organizations to the forced expulsions saying, "France must not be ashamed of its immigration policy, it must on the contrary be proud." He was acting in respect of "the Republic's laws" and the

“foundations of a state’s sovereignty”, he added.

However, there are fears in the political establishment over the hostility to the French military presence in Afghanistan expressed in the opinion polls. While these sentiments have been given no political representation by the French “left”, could be ignited into an active popular opposition. The contradiction between claiming to be in Afghanistan to protect the population and the French state’s brutal treatment of fleeing Afghans has been widely noted.

Fadela Amara, secretary of state for urban policy, another former PS leader and anti-racist campaigner, is circumspect: “Afghanistan is still a country at war ... The repatriations must be suspended, especially as far as concerns the Afghan people. We must be careful. France is not just any country on the international stage.” (*Figaro* October 26).

The Socialist Party leader Martine Aubry declared the parliamentary opposition’s distaste for Besson’s “charter flight of shame”. She opposed the expulsions neither on humanitarian grounds nor in opposition to France’s war of aggression, but out of political expediency. “We are currently in Afghanistan to fight the Talibans, and men who flee the Talibans ... are oppressed by them, they’re sent back into the tiger’s jaws.” It was, according to Aubry, not “dignified of France to do that.”

Encouraged by such “opposition”, Besson announced his intention to “launch a great debate on the values of national identity, on what it is to be French today.” He stressed the need for “pride in being French.”

Besson has provided living proof of Samuel Johnson’s old adage: “Patriotism is the last refuge of a scoundrel.”

These “debates” will be organised in the two-and-a-half-month period leading up to the regional elections in March 2010 by the *préfets* (state officials in every region whose remit is to apply the laws and policies of the central government, the local police chiefs). They will climax in a “synthesising conference”.

Besson also supports the campaign launched by Sarkozy and André Gerin for the banning of the burka. In a televised discussion on LCI TV Besson said, “We can debate the timing of the law...but on the principles there is no debate: the burka is unacceptable and contrary to the values of national identity.”

Among his proposals are the compulsory singing and teaching of the national anthem, the Marseillaise, in schools and “to offer a sort of citizen’s education” to every adult willing to “take advantage of it.”

The profoundly reactionary social perspective within his nationalist discourse emerges in his statement quoted in *Figaro* October 25: “A country with meagre social welfare could afford to take in illegal immigrants. But we must protect our social pact.”

Echoing a theme dear to the fascists, he identifies immigrants—not the ongoing austerity policies of his government—as a threat to the welfare state.

Besson openly acknowledges that he is adopting large elements of the programme of Le Pen’s National Front. “We should never have left to the NF a number of values, such as patriotism,” he said. He claims that adopting such values will deal a death-blow to the neo-fascists.

Before defecting to Sarkozy, Eric Besson had been part of the campaign team of Ségolène Royal, in the 2007 presidential

election. The Socialist Party’s defeated candidate expressed fundamental agreement with her former colleague. In an October 29 article, *Figaro* reports, “Certainly she considered on Wednesday that the national identity debate constituted a ‘diversionary operation and an operation to win over a certain electorate before the regional elections.’ But she immediately added that she considered that this debate is ‘a real debate’... ‘I was the first to raise the issue of the nation and national identity...This debate is fundamental’.”

Far from considering that Besson’s chauvinistic campaign will weaken them politically, Marine Le Pen, likely successor to her father as head of the National Front, declared jubilantly, “What is important is that the debate is commencing. For 25 years now the NF has been calling for this debate and we were refused it.” (*Figaro*, October 29)

Other PS commentators, affecting outrage against their former colleague, accused Sarkozy and Besson of crude electioneering. Jean-Christophe Cambadélis, parliamentary deputy and national secretary of the PS, condemned Besson last Sunday. “Entangled in a disastrous mismanagement of immigration, faced with public deficits, discomforted by the polls, sackings, the cost of living, Mr Besson is proposing to carry out a debate on national identity. It’s rather crude.” He went on to point out that the issues of immigration and law and order are being reactivated five months from the regional elections.

At stake are not just narrow electoral considerations. The French ruling class, of which the “left” is an essential political component, is aligning the political and state forces to be mobilised against the inevitable mass resistance of the working class to pauperization in the interests of French capitalism in crisis.

All appeals to racism and nationalism must be rejected with contempt by workers and youth on the basis of class unity. For this a socialist and internationalist perspective must be developed in France, Europe and internationally.



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