

Israel constructing giant refugee camp in Negev desert

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14 December 2010

Israel's government is to build a detention centre to hold up to 10,000 refugees who arrive every year, until their asylum requests have been rejected and they can be expelled.

The vast majority of the migrants have fled from war-torn and poverty-stricken countries in the Horn of Africa such as Darfur in the Sudan, and Eritrea, via Egypt. Many have been persecuted, abused or tortured.

The detention centre is to be built at or near the site of a former prison camp for Palestinians in the southern Negev desert, near Israel's border with Egypt. It will be run by the prison service, and detainees will not be allowed to work. People could languish in the refugee camp for an extended period, even years, without work or education. It is in violation of the 1951 United Nations convention on refugees, to which Israel is a signatory and which states that the country the refugee arrives in is responsible for his or her welfare, health and rights. These rights include freedom of movement, access to documents and the right to work.

Israel has not introduced asylum legislation, because it would mean absorbing tens of thousands of non-Jewish refugees—threatening “the Jewish character of the state” on which Zionist policy is based. It would lead to renewed demands for the right to return of Palestinians and their descendants who fled or were forced from their homes in the wars of 1948 and 1967. Thus, all regulations regarding migrant workers and refugees are at the discretion of the minister of the interior, Eli Yishai, head of the ultra-orthodox Shas party.

Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu said, “The wave of infiltrators must be stopped. The wave is increasing and is threatening Israeli jobs. We will not stop war refugees. But we must stop the mass entry of illegal migrants because of the harsh implications for Israel's

character”.

As many Israeli human rights groups have pointed out, the State of Israel was established to provide a safe haven for refugees and immigrants of Jewish descent, and grants citizenship to a Jew from anywhere in the world who chooses to apply for it. Now it is closing its doors to people who need help.

Israel views only a few of the 35,000 Africans who have entered Israel over the past few years as refugees, while the vast majority are considered to be illegal economic migrants. More than 10,000 are said by the government to have entered this year in the search for work, and the monthly rate has increased threefold since the start of 2010.

Immigration police in Tel Aviv have conducted scores of arrests in areas largely populated by immigrants, without regard for the status of those arrested. Approximately 17,000 asylum-seekers have fled to Israel from Sudan, Eritrea, Democratic Republic of Congo, and the Ivory Coast. Without clear legal rights, many work for a pittance. Many have been detained in prison camps, and more than 270 have been returned to Egypt.

The announcement raised a storm of protest from aid groups. The Association of Civil Rights in Israel and the Hotline for Migrant Workers issued a statement saying, “In light of the harsh conditions under which asylum-seekers are being held in Ketziot Prison, with small children being held in crowded tents with their mothers without proper conditions, it is unclear how Israel can establish a much larger facility without it immediately becoming a humanitarian disaster.”

It added, “It is unclear how it will be determined who is a war refugee and who is not, when the state has yet to establish a system to differentiate between those who are war refugees and those who are not, and does not

check asylum applications of Sudanese and Eritrean citizens.”

Physicians for Human Rights said, “To incarcerate victims of torture, rape, war and murder without time limits, without judicial review and in contravention of international conventions for the protection of refugees will be a mark of Cain on the State of Israel.”

The group said that the plan would not only not stop the refugees coming via Egypt, it would worsen their physical and psychological health.

A senior government official in Jerusalem said that Israel was ready to renew its offer to pay millions of dollars to any African or Western country willing to absorb the influx of migrants attempting to infiltrate Israel.

The UN has been silent. William Tall, the UN Human Rights Commission’s representative in Israel, said the UN commission knew about the government’s plan to build the facility only in general terms, but was looking for further information on how it would work before commenting.

The cabinet’s decision to build the detention centre follows just one week after work started on a barrier along 140 kilometres of Israel’s 250-kilometre border with Egypt, equipped with advanced surveillance devices to stop people crossing from the Sinai desert in Egypt into Israel. One part will run south from Gaza for about 30 miles, while a second part will run north from Taba near the Red Sea. The barrier is expected to take over a year to complete at a cost of about US\$370 million. The government is also proposing to fine employers who hire illegal migrants.

The declared purpose of the barrier is to prevent African migrant workers and asylum-seekers from entering Israel from Egypt. But Netanyahu made clear that, like other security measures, it is intended to tighten the noose on the Gazan masses and deny them access to essential supplies. The barrier would prevent Islamic militants and smugglers from crossing the border, he declared. Military forces will patrol the barrier, and eventually the full length of the border will be sealed.

Egyptian forces also police the border with Israel and have stepped up their efforts to stop people entering Israel. Last year, they shot at least 17 people and injured many more.

After Libya and Italy agreed to cut off the sea route to

Europe in 2009, desperate Africans are seeking work in Israel, which they believe offers better work opportunities than Europe. They pay hundreds of dollars to Bedouin people-smugglers and are prepared to run the gauntlet of the Egyptian border police.

Nearly 10 percent Israel’s workforce is made up of 250,000 migrant workers, mostly from the Philippines, Thailand and China. They typically work in agriculture, nursing and construction, for low wages, and are subject to horrific exploitation. The government views more than half of them as illegal.

Israel’s dependency on foreign and low-paid labour began after the 1993 Oslo Accords opened up regional trade and investment, and its corporations moved factories abroad. Liberalisation, free-market policies and declining agricultural subsidies spelt the end of Israel’s policy of working the land and its *kibbutzim*. The turn to migrant labour enabled it to compete in unprotected markets. Since then, more than 1 million have come to work in Israel, ending its dependency on cheap Palestinian workers and causing a drastic decline in living conditions in the Occupied Territories.

After the second intifada in September 2000, provoked in no small part by the deteriorating social position of Palestinians, Israel sealed its borders. It gave work permits to only about 20,000 Palestinian workers, although at least as many again are believed to be working in Israel illegally. In contrast, Israel gave 120,000 permits for migrant workers in 2009.

While migrant labour initially had the advantage of not being Palestinian, as far as the various state parties were concerned, they are now portrayed as a threat themselves. Many have been in Israel for years, and their children know no other country. But Israel has no provision for granting citizenship to migrant workers, however long they have been resident. There have been numerous attacks on migrant communities by the government, which has been trying to deport some 400 children under five years of age.



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