

Israel's ruling Likud party incites racist attacks on migrants

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Racist attacks injured dozens of asylum seekers, following a rally where leading members of the ruling Likud party made inflammatory remarks against African migrants.

On Wednesday May 23, rightwing activists organised a demonstration in Tel Aviv's impoverished neighbourhood of Hatikva to protest against the presence of 60,000 asylum seekers in Israel from Africa via Egypt. Similar demonstrations were called in equally poor and neglected suburbs in the cities of Bnei Brak, Ashdod, Ashkelon and Eilat.

Miri Regev of Likud addressed the Hatikva demonstration of some 1,000 people, describing the asylum seekers as a "cancer in our body". She promised to do everything she could "in order to bring them back to where they belong".

She attacked human rights groups aiding the migrants, saying, "All the leftists who filed High Court appeals (against the deportation of African migrants) should be ashamed of themselves".

Danny Danon of Likud said that the only solution to the "problem" of the "infiltrators" would be to "begin talking about expulsion". "We must expel the infiltrators from Israel. We should not be afraid to say the words 'expulsion now'," he said. They had established an enemy state, with Tel Aviv as its capital.

Michael Ben-Ari, from Ichud Leumi, a national-religious party, called for all African migrants to be imprisoned and deported. He used to be a member of Meir Kahane's Kach party, which called for the expulsion of the Palestinians from Israel, the West Bank and Gaza. The Kach was banned in Israel and placed on the US State Department's list of terrorist groups. Ben-Ari was refused an entry visa to the US last March.

Ronit Tirosh, a member of the main opposition

Kadima, said that "all the African infiltrators" need to be deported.

Following the speeches, violence broke out. Demonstrators attacked shops, properties and cars belonging to the migrants and beat up men and women. Firecrackers were thrown at the police. Seventeen people were later arrested, 15 for rioting and assault and two for looting a store owned by migrants.

This latest outbreak of violence follows a number of recent attacks. Last month, Molotov cocktails were hurled at four apartments where African asylum lived as well as at a kindergarten, which is also the home of the Nigerian couple who run it, in Shapira in south Tel Aviv.

Earlier in the day, Interior Minister Eli Yishai, head of the rightwing religious Shas, told parliament that if he were given the go ahead, there would not be a single "infiltrator" left in Israel in a year's time: "I would change the law so that every infiltrator is put in jail."

In the southern town of Arad, a candidate from Foreign Minister Avigdor Lieberman's ultra-rightwing Israel Beitenu was elected mayor after mounting a campaign based on a promise to remove the migrants from town. At Wednesday evening's rally, demonstrators carried posters reading, "South Tel Aviv a refugee camp" and "Infiltrators, leave our home".

In nearby Shapira and Kiryat Shalom, demonstrators waved banners reading, "Yishai was right."

Racism and xenophobia are being whipped up by the government and across the spectrum of official politics. The aim is to divide working people and divert growing anger over declining living standards and rising social problems along racist lines, while fostering nationalism through centering this offensive on demands to preserve the Jewish identity of the State of Israel at a time when an attack on Iran and possibly Lebanon and

Gaza is actively being considered.

According to Israel's Population and Immigration Authority, 5,528 migrants entered Israel through its southern border with Egypt in the first three months of this year, compared to 1,742 in the same period last year. The vast majority of the migrants have fled to Israel from war-torn countries such as Sudan, Eritrea, Democratic Republic of Congo, and the Ivory Coast. Many have been persecuted, abused or tortured in their home countries.

Originally bound for Europe, they found their route via Libya blocked. Many have been smuggled into Israel by Bedouins living in Egypt's Sinai desert. According to the 1951 UN convention on refugees, to which Israel is a signatory, the country where the refugee has arrived is responsible for his welfare, health and rights, including freedom of movement, access to documents and the right to work.

But Israel has not introduced asylum legislation, because it would mean absorbing tens of thousands of non-Jewish refugees and lead to renewed demands for the right of return for Palestinians and their descendants who were forced from their homes in the wars of 1948 and 1967.

Without clear legal rights, some asylum seekers work for a pittance for unscrupulous employers while others, in an even more desperate situation, are homeless and beg for money on the streets of Tel Aviv's poorest suburbs. They often live alongside poor Israelis in *Argazim*—crates, shacks and other improvised homes.

All regulations regarding migrant workers and refugees are at the discretion of Interior Minister Yishai. They are issued with temporary documents only, and are not eligible for either work or public services.

In March Israel began work on a detention centre, the world's largest, in the Negev desert, first announced in 2010. It is to be built at or near the site of a former prison camp for Palestinians near Israel's border with Egypt. It will be run by the prison service, and detainees will not be allowed to work.

A nauseating report in *Haaretz*, Israel's nominally liberal press, allows the government to portray this as a virtual paradise. A senior defence official says without challenge or comment, "It's not really a prison, though. They can walk around, they have 4.5 meters in their rooms. The organized public space is pretty huge. You

don't get that in a prison."

"Nowhere in the world is so much space allotted per inmate," the senior defense official continues. "It will have trees, flowers and bushes."

Only amid descriptions of the various facilities available, and under an "artist's impression" that could have been lifted from a holiday brochure, does it report that construction tenders will "determine whether four, seven or eight refugees will be housed in each room," that "Each refugee would live at the center for up to three years," that "The facility will have hundreds of gates along its fences, though each wing and room will be able to be locked down" and "The ministry has yet to decide whether to allocate separate family areas."

When the Negav facility was first proposed, Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu declared, "The wave of infiltrators must be stopped...because of the harsh implications for Israel's character".

The historic parallels of such a facility and the accompanying rhetoric regarding maintaining ethnic/religious identity hardly need stating. The political results of allowing this to go unchallenged are now being played out in the form of pogrom-style attacks by rightist thugs on the streets of Tel Aviv.



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