

Mass protests by migrants and asylum seekers in Israel

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Tens of thousands of African asylum seekers marched to Tel Aviv's Rabin Square Sunday to protest measures restricting their freedom of movement, ability to work and long delays in processing refugee applications.

About 300 asylum seekers held a protest outside the Interior Ministry in Israel's Red Sea port of Eilat in the south of the country.

They are demanding official refugee status and an end to the government's policy of holding them for long periods in the new detention centre at Holot in the Negev.

As well as mounting public protests, asylum seekers began a three-day strike from their work in restaurants, hotels and other workplaces throughout the country.

On Monday, they, along with Israeli supporters, demonstrated outside the embassies and diplomatic offices of the European Union, France, Canada, Sweden, Britain, Germany, Italy, the African Union and the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. By far the biggest rally of thousands of migrants took place in front of the American embassy in downtown Tel Aviv. They chanted, "We are all refugees" and "Yes to freedom, no to prison!"

The protestors demanded that foreign governments put pressure on Israel to recognise them as refugees, stop arresting them and free those incarcerated. They issued a statement calling on the world "to help us in the face of Israel's harsh policies against us," adding, "We will call on the international community to support our struggle against Israel's violations of basic human rights."

Last month, 250 migrants left Holot to hold a sit-in in Jerusalem in protest against new rules keeping them in the detention centre for up to a year, leading to the arrest of hundreds of migrants.

Under Israeli law, migrants are forbidden from

working until they are registered as asylum seekers. This is all but impossible. Indeed, according to the UN Refugee Agency, while the average national recognition rate of asylum seekers is 39 percent, in Israel, the rate is less than 1 percent. Most of Israel's asylum seekers are Eritreans and Sudanese, who have an average international recognition rate of 84 percent and 64 percent respectively.

There are about 60,000 African asylum seekers, mostly fleeing civil strife and repression from Eritrea and Sudan, who have crossed Israel's border with Egypt since 2006. They typically live alongside poor Israelis in Tel Aviv's impoverished southern suburbs. Many live in crates, shacks and other improvised homes, without access to basic rights and treated by the police as criminals.

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu declared that the vast majority were "not refugees" but "economic migrants" who had crossed illegally into Israel before the border fence with Egypt was reinforced. The "full weight of the law" would be used to ensure that they did not remain, he said. "No demonstration or strike will help."

Netanyahu added that 2,600 "infiltrators" had been expelled in 2013, six times more than in 2012, and that this number would increase in 2014.

Former Interior Minister Eli Yishai of the Shas Party, who was responsible for the decision to build Holot, said that the scale of the migrants' protest in Tel Aviv underlined the necessity of strictly enforcing the laws mandating their repatriation, because Tel Aviv had become "an African city."

New amendments to Israel's anti-infiltration law passed last month allow the authorities to detain people without a valid visa for up to a year without a judicial hearing. Only those considered war refugees would be

allowed to stay.

To this end, Israel established Holot detention centre, the world's largest, in the Negev desert near Israel's border with Egypt, to replace the Saharonim prison where migrants were previously held. Three weeks ago, the government transferred 483 African migrants from prisons elsewhere to Holot. Last week, it began instructing other migrants from Eritrea and Sudan to report to Holot within 30 days or face imprisonment.

The Holot detention centre is run by the prison service and designated as an open prison. Detainees are not allowed to work and must report for roll call three times a day. People languish there without work or education, and in violation of the 1951 United Nations convention on refugees, to which Israel is a signatory. The convention states that the country a 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.

One Eritrean asked *Ha'aretz*, "Why are the authorities calling Holot an 'open prison,' if it is in the desert, far from any city and run by the prison services...Refugees are calling us from the prisons, crying that they have no freedom. In recent weeks, many refugees have been chased through the streets by Israeli authorities. We're afraid to leave our homes."

Many workers face racist discrimination and are brutally exploited by employers. The Ministry of Labour turns a blind eye and the trade unions do nothing. The government initially turned to low paid foreign labour following the 1988 Palestinian intifada, when it restricted the number of labour permits for Palestinians living in the occupied territories. It now has one of the highest proportions of migrant labour in the world, with about 300,000, or 10 percent of the workforce.

According to the Hotline for Migrant Workers, Israel has put pressure on hundreds of jailed migrants to accept payouts and leave. More than a dozen agreed to leave. A study by the End Child Detention Coalition found that 83 percent of detained migrant children and parents exhibit post-traumatic symptoms.

Israel has apparently struck a deal last August with a 'third country' where those African migrants whom Israel sees as "illegal infiltrators" would be sent. The country is believed to be Uganda, though the Ugandan government denies any deal. As Uganda has repatriated

other refugees to their home country, Israel's asylum seekers could end up being deported back to the countries from which they fled.

Israel has refused to introduce 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. According to human rights groups, Israel has recognised less than 200 people as refugees since its establishment in 1948.

To do so would also 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. All regulations regarding migrant workers and refugees are at the discretion of the minister of the interior.

The United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (UNHCR) representative in Israel issued a rare press release, *Israel's new laws and policies do not live up to the Spirit of the 1951 Refugee Convention*, criticising Israel and calling on the government to consider alternatives to its current policy of "warehousing" of migrants. The representative, Walpurga Englbrecht, said, "I am particularly disquieted about the purpose of the so-called 'open' residence facility in Holot which, in its current form and despite its designation as 'open,' would appear to operate as a detention centre from where there is no release...This means in effect indefinite detention."



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