

# “Abu-Ghraib-like” torture of refugees exposed in Germany

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Reports from various German refugee facilities have revealed that residents are subjected to systematic torture and humiliation. Last weekend, videos and pictures emerged showing the serious mistreatment of refugees by security staff at one facility. One short video shows a refugee lying on a mat covered with vomit. The refugee asks someone off camera why they are hitting him.

"Do you want another? Should I kick you in the face, or what?" responds the security guard. "Then I do not need to beat you." His colleague orders the victim to lie down in the vomit.

The video was shot in the refugee camp in Burbach in North Rhine Westphalia, and was leaked to a journalist, who then alerted the police. During a search of the security guards' day room, police discovered a baton and a knuckleduster.

Police officers also found more images on the mobile phone of a security guard. In one picture, disseminated via WhatsApp, a security guard can be seen pushing his boot into the neck of a refugee lying on the ground, handcuffed.

The images revealed "A touch of Abu Ghraib," a headline in the *Frankfurter Rundschau* newspaper acknowledged, while *Bild* stated: "These images remind us of Abu Ghraib."

The police are investigating six security guards for aggravated assault in Burbach. Two of them have previous convictions. In addition, the police have said an employee at a refugee camp in Essen and another in Bad Berleburg are being investigated for assaulting and beating residents. A total of eleven investigations are currently underway.

The WDR news programme *Westpol* showed a doctor's certificate regarding the injuries of a resident at the Essen home. "They mistreat us here", a refugee told the programme. "The security staff have transformed this home into a prison. They hit us. And especially if you

complain. They do what they want with us. They treat us as if we had no rights."

On Tuesday, the regional newspaper *Siegerland Kurier* published excerpts from an anonymous interview conducted with one of the guards from Burbach, who can be heard in the video. The employee, whose name was changed by the editors to S., leaves no doubt that the abuse of refugees is systematic in the refugee system. Attacks, as documented on the video, have always taken place, he told the newspaper.

This could be for violations of the ban on cigarettes and alcohol. His colleagues were really keen to catch residents for such infringements, he said. "They walked round the hallways sniffing at doors. If they smelled cigarette smoke, the room was stormed," explains S. The guards doing this described themselves as "SS-troops;" i.e., Nazi storm troopers. Many of his co-workers had a "clearly visible right-wing background," he said.

The scenes shown in the video took place in the so-called "problem room". This is where residents were taken if they "made trouble" or asked questions. They were locked in the room for up to eight hours. In some cases they were denied the use of the toilet, and had to urinate out the window.

According to S., at least some police officers who were called about disputes between residents welcomed the abuse. "One once said: The next time, we'll pick them up after you've worked them over for five hours," S. recalled. The officer had been called to arrest a resident detained by the security staff.

The *Siegerland Kurier* also published photos from the camp at Burbach. They show sanitary facilities smeared with feces and menstrual blood, rubbish-strewn corridors and injured residents. S. reported that it often took days until defects were rectified. Medical care was often not provided.

The refugee camp in Burbach was established last year

at an old barracks. It was meant to provide accommodation for 500 people, but is now home to 700 refugees. Acuh, the Essen camp, is seriously overcrowded, with 650 residents in a facility meant for 300.

Both camps are run by the for-profit company "European Homecare", which operates a total of 40 camps and is considered the market leader in the sector. The security service at Burbach was first outsourced by "European Homecare" to the firm "ESS", and then to "SKI Security".

The terrible conditions in the refugee camps and their systematic character have shocked people throughout Germany. At the same time, politicians of all parties have cynically tried to downplay the events.

The North Rhine Westphalia state Interior Minister Ralf Jäger (SPD, Social Democratic Party) described the torture by security guards as "mistakes by individual criminals". Criminals had infiltrated the security company, he told broadcaster ZDF. This was "reprehensible, but sometimes not preventable, despite all the checks, despite all the supervision". Nevertheless, he declared, "we need more controls" and "our partners have not complied with all contractual conditions".

Federal Interior Minister Thomas De Maizière (CDU, Christian Democratic Union) also tried to downplay the scandal. He was sure that "the state of North Rhine Westphalia would correct these deficiencies without delay". On Monday, government spokesman Steffen Seibert announced a rapid investigation and stressed that Germany was "a philanthropic country".

Opposition representatives mainly criticised the lack of finance for the refugee accommodations, without making any serious criticism of Germany's brutal asylum regime. The parliamentary leader of the Greens, Kathrin Göring-Eckardt, demanded that the government "consider as soon as possible" which buildings it could provide for the initial reception of refugees. In addition, "it must provide financial relief for the federal states and municipalities".

The Left Party domestic political spokesperson Ulla Jelpke, and Özlem Demirel, the state spokeswoman for the party in North Rhine Westphalia, both provided statements. Jelpke called for better financial support for the local authorities. "Local authorities must be able to provide care for asylum seekers, instead of placing this task in the hands of profit-oriented companies," she said.

Demirel added, "I expect that not only the security guards responsible will be punished quickly, but that there will be major improvements in the standards of

accommodation and the security staff. It must be excluded that right-wing extremists can work in refugee shelters with or without a uniform".

In reality, the brutal acts of the security staff are not simply due to the poor financing of the accommodations or the result of a lack of control. Since the change to the asylum law in 1993, the situation of asylum seekers in Germany has systematically deteriorated. The use of inhumane treatment was part of a deliberate plan to deter further refugees and curb immigration.

Late last year, 350 refugees who were originally stranded on the Italian island of Lampedusa were seriously harassed by the Hamburg Senate (city/state government). The refugees were denied basic care, and even the Church was prohibited from providing this. At the same time, the Hamburg police organized a large-scale operation in the city, subjecting all dark-skinned people to ID controls.

There were several cases of police brutality against refugees in Berlin over the summer. Jelpke's demand to use the public sector instead of "profit-oriented enterprises" in the refugee camps, or Demirel's proposal for the better organization of the security guards are the height of cynicism.

The barbaric conditions in the refugee camps have been known for some time and are deliberate. Earlier reports revealed mass epidemics, the placing of refugees in dilapidated facilities and a lack of basic hygienic conditions. A UNICEF study severely criticised the German authorities for massive violations of the UN Children's Convention in dealing with refugee children.



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