

UK Conservative government escalates attacks on asylum seekers

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The UK Conservative government has announced a series of measures aimed, not at helping asylum seekers and refugees in line with Britain's obligations under international law, but at further restricting their rights.

Earlier this month, Prime Minister David Cameron stoked up the xenophobic atmosphere in Britain by attacking asylum seekers and refugees seeking to escape North Africa and cross the English Channel from France as a "swarm."

At least 10 migrants have died attempting to make the dangerous journey since last June. Cameron vowed to increase the deportation rate of those already in the UK, ostensibly to deter other would-be migrants.

At the same time, the government and media are attempting to confuse people about the rights of asylum seekers and refugees while concealing the responsibility of the major powers and their endless imperialist wars of aggression for the tragedy that continues to unfold.

Far from constituting a "swarm," the total number of asylum applicants and their dependents constituted an estimated 10 percent of net migration in 2012, down from 49 percent in 2002, and up slightly from 4 percent in 2010.

Home Secretary Theresa May, in a joint article with her French counterpart, Bernard Cazeneuve, published in the *Sunday Telegraph*, said that it was important to break the link between "crossing the Mediterranean and achieving settlement in Europe." She declared that Britain's "streets are not paved with gold."

May's tirade was aimed at creating maximum confusion about Britain's obligations to these desperate people and to divide the working class, by deflecting growing social anger against immigrants.

Asylum, which is granted to people fleeing persecution in their own country, is a fundamental

right, enshrined in international law. It was developed in response to the Holocaust, in which millions of Jews and others persecuted by the Nazi regime perished. Many could have been saved, but the US, Britain and other countries refused entry to those desperately seeking refuge in the 1930s.

The 1951 Geneva Convention on the protection of refugees sought to make concrete the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which guarantees a "right to seek and enjoy asylum." This is generally interpreted to mean that someone has the right to apply for humanitarian protection. Governments are also banned from returning migrants to a country where their lives would be in danger, a process known as "refoulement."

To gain asylum status, it is necessary for someone to prove that they have been persecuted due to their race, religion, nationality, political opinion, or membership in a particular social group. In the European Union (EU), people who have been persecuted for other reasons and face a "real risk of serious harm" if returned to their home country are also eligible for "subsidiary protection."

A refugee, in contrast, is someone who has been officially declared to be fleeing persecution or war by the UN High Commissioner for Refugees or by another country. Such a designation does not give an automatic right to go to another country, but remaining in an insanitary and squalid refugee camp is such a brutal experience that many risk taking the chance of reaching Europe via people traffickers.

Either way, it is not illegal for either asylum seekers or refugees to enter Europe without documents in search of asylum. Indeed, that is the whole point of the right to seek asylum.

The Conservatives are introducing a new Immigration

Bill in the autumn that will cut the already miserly level of support—about £5 a day—given to those seeking asylum.

Most of those seeking asylum are driven to claim financial assistance because they are banned from working under the Immigration and Asylum Act introduced by the Labour government in 1999. Without access to social housing and income support, asylum seekers are among the poorest people in the country.

Immigration Minister James Brokenshire went even further, saying that the “automatic right” to benefits would be withdrawn even from those seeking asylum in order to send a message “that Britain was not a soft touch on asylum.”

The government is also proposing to speed up the deportation of asylum seekers who have their claim for asylum rejected. They will be rebranded as “illegal immigrants” and given just 28 days to leave the country.

The UK Border Agency police also have the power to seize failed asylum seekers without notice and incarcerate them in a detention centre pending deportation. Suicides among those caught in this terrifying situation are not uncommon.

The government also intends to replace the assisted voluntary return programme, currently run independently by Refugee Action, with an in-house government-run service. This is unlikely to be trusted by asylum seekers, leading to even more of them becoming destitute or homeless and fewer choosing to return home.

Even more concerning is the government’s recent decision to reclassify Eritrea as a “safe” place to return to despite a recent UN report detailing “systematic, widespread and gross human rights violations, forcing hundreds of thousands of refugees to flee the country” and “on a scope and scale seldom witnessed elsewhere.”

Since Eritrea’s designation as “safe,” the rate of refusals for Eritrean asylum seekers has risen by almost 40 percent. Reports suggest the government may designate other countries as “safe” in order to reduce the numbers granted asylum.

Together, these measures are bound to increase the number of asylum seekers and refugees that become “illegal” immigrants. A new law will force landlords to evict such immigrants after receiving a Home Office

order, rather than a court order, and face a jail sentence for failing to do so.

Home Secretary May said Britain was working “to ensure that people in the Horn of Africa understand the stark realities of a dangerous journey that will result in their being returned to their own countries.” Development aid and “investment” will be target countries in the Middle East and Africa to fight “illegal immigration” and accept migrants returned to their home countries more easily.

Asylum seekers face almost insurmountable hurdles to defend their right to stay. In 2013, Britain initially accepted only 36 percent of 23,507 asylum applications. While this is the third largest in Europe, it trails far behind Germany (22,165) and Sweden (15,290). This figure is even worse relative to the size of the British population. Only Italy, Greece and Spain accepted fewer asylum seekers per head of population.



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