

Refugees protest being held at UK military base in Cyprus

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Video footage obtained by *the Guardian* shows distressing scenes of refugees protesting at their treatment while held at a British military base in Cyprus.

A total of 114 refugees, most from Syria but also including Lebanese and Palestinians, including 67 men, 19 women and 28 children, landed on the island in two boats last month near the Royal Air Force (RAF) base at Akrotiri.

They were moved to RAF Dhekelia near Larnaca.

The main disturbances happened on Monday night. Two tents housing the refugees were set ablaze. Several people were treated for smoke inhalation.

The video footage shows British police officers confronting angry migrants, as they force their way towards a man threatening to hang himself with a noose made from cotton sheets.

One man is seen shouting, "Let us leave! We are people, not animals!" Others shouted "Guantánamo!" in reference to the US prison in Cuba.

Police, some carrying Tasers and handcuffs, try to block the path of one man who scaled a fence. A man with a bloodied face from cutting himself as a protest says to the camera, "We have asked for journalists to be present here. Why are you keeping us hidden? Because you're keeping us in tents?"

A boy, age 12, says people cannot leave their tents because it is "so cold": "There are no schools, there is nothing. We have no shoes, we only have these flip flops."

On Tuesday, Ibrahim Maarouf, a 37-year-old Palestinian English language teacher fleeing from the Shatila refugee camp near Beirut, Lebanon, spoke to the media as a representative of the migrants.

He said of UK Conservative Prime Minister David Cameron, "We're in his hands, if he's a real human

and cares for humanity we're human as well. So don't make a lesson of us. He's making a lesson of us so other people do not come. He won't take us because he's afraid if we go to the UK other people will come. We want our freedom."

He said one of the group had tried to hang himself some days earlier and that police guarding the base had struck a pregnant woman.

The migrant boats had not meant to land on Cyprus and were heading to Greece.

"None of us wants to be here ... We should go to England. We told them we want to go to England, but they told us, 'no'. Now we're in a British prison," Maarouf declared.

A man holding his young daughter told the BBC, "They want us to take asylum in Cyprus, but we don't want that. We want to go to Europe, that's our dream."

The UK is reportedly responsible for any migrants arriving directly on either of its two bases, under provisions laid down in a 2003 memorandum of understanding with Cyprus. Cyprus has agreed to provide services, welfare benefits, and the right to apply for a work permit on its territory, but only if this is funded by the UK.

The UK also has the responsibility to find a country willing to take in any people recognised as refugees. So far, just 14 of the migrants have been moved to Cyprus proper, either because they are seeking refugee status or have been deemed vulnerable.

The primary concern of the UK authorities is, as the migrants indicate, to make an example of those imprisoned at RAF Dhekelia. The government said it was aware of a "series of incidents at the temporary accommodation facility," before stressing that "The UK Government will not allow a new migrant route to open up to the UK."

A spokeswoman added, “Those staying there have access to three meals a day, shelter, privacy and communications, which United Nations staff have visited and say exceeds the standard of comparable set-ups.”

When the 114 migrants first set foot on Cyprus, the UK government rejected any responsibility for what happens to them.

The United Nations’ refugee agency, UNHCR, said the UK should be held legally responsible for resettling the refugees because the coastal RAF base at Akrotiri is UK sovereign territory.

In reply, Defence Secretary Michael Fallon gave an interview to ITV News in which he claimed, “We have an agreement with the Republic of Cyprus, which will now be processing their claims for asylum in Cyprus. We’re not going to allow this to become some new route, some new migration route into Britain. That would be the wrong thing to do—we mustn’t encourage more people to set out on what is now a very dangerous sea crossing.”

The migrants have been given a choice of claiming asylum in Cyprus, or being sent back to their home countries, the government stressed.

It is this hardline stance that was the main reason provoking the disturbances last weekend.

The new arrivals are being housed not far from a group of Iraqi, Sudanese and Ethiopian refugees who arrived at RAF Akrotiri as long ago as 1998.

Of the 75 migrants who first arrived 17 years earlier, 21 are still there to this day. Adding the children born there and family members who joined them, there are still around 70 migrants resident at the RAF Akrotiri base.

It was the controversy surrounding that earlier group of refugees that led to the now variously interpreted agreement between the Cypriot authorities and the UK. It is the fear of being housed for years in a mini concentration camp that has driven the group of recent migrants to such desperate measures.



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