

# Refugees confront misery in Berlin

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Pictures from Berlin are travelling around the world. Lines of exhausted and desperate human beings, including women, children, the elderly and sick, forced to wait through the night and protected from the cold only with emergency blankets. Thousands are confined in mass camps in sports halls and airport hangars in inhumane conditions.

Criticism of the treatment of refugees in Berlin has been growing. The words “Lageso” (Berlin state agency for health and social care) and “hangars” for the mass internment camps in the heart of the city have become by-words for arbitrary bureaucracy and anti-refugee chauvinism. It is becoming increasingly clear that the deplorable conditions at Lageso and in mass accommodation camps are deliberate and aimed at deterring other refugees.

At the beginning of December, 40 lawyers submitted a criminal complaint against the previous head of Lageso, Franz Allert, as well as social affairs senator Mario Czaja (Christian Democrats, CDU) and other administration figures for “grievous bodily harm and failure to exercise their official powers.”

The lawyers, organised in the Republican Lawyers Association (RAV) and the Association of Democratic Jurists (VDJ), have drawn attention to the major violation of the law by the authorities at Lageso. “Injuries and illnesses, hunger and homelessness among refugees has become the norm in Berlin,” states the press release from December 7.

Lawyer Christina Clemm, an executive member of RAV, pointed out several incidents of physical injuries to the WSW, including a broken leg, bruises and fainting fits. This is proved simply by the number of ambulances called out to the internment camps. Additionally, the refugees are subjected to homelessness and hunger, since Lageso only gives out hostel vouchers for a week and forces refugees to join queues to obtain an extension.

If Lageso does not pay or the payment is delayed, according to Clemm, hostel operators ruthlessly throw refugees out after a week. Entire families are left on the streets without a roof over their head and without money. “This situation has been accepted by Czaja, Allert and others, thus making them criminally responsible,” the lawyer noted.

As the WSW subsequently found out, many hostels remained empty over Christmas. Lageso, which remained closed over the Christmas period even though 400 refugees were expected every day, apparently has outstanding bills to pay. Berlin state radio RBB reported millions of euros of outstanding payments to hostel operators.

The refugees are left with no other alternative but to move into emergency accommodation, or the grim and unlivable airport hangars. The senate and its “office for the coordination of refugee management,” founded in the summer, led by former police president Klaus Keese, is deliberately working towards this end.

In a government statement from November 12, Berlin’s Mayor Michael Müller (Social Democrats, SPD) announced that all seven hangars at Tempelhof airport would be occupied by 6,000 refugees within a few weeks, and several days ago, it was stated that 4,000 would be in place by Christmas.

Living conditions for refugees in the airport hangars are catastrophic: no showers for weeks, no possibility of washing, no private space as up to ten people are confined to a tent or container, bad food, poor light and barely any prospect of ever living in humane conditions.

In the face of growing criticism of Berlin’s refugee policy, the SPD/CDU coalition state government began identifying the first scapegoats. On December 9, Müller fired the head of Lageso, Franz Allert. His former boss, social affairs senator Czaja, is coming under increased pressure.

The Greens, currently in opposition, are demanding Czaja's resignation. They are exploiting the misery of refugees in Berlin for their election campaign to the state legislature next year. Green politician Renate Künast accused Czaja in Spiegel Online of being incapable of "sensible and efficient crisis management."

In addition, Czaja also faced accusations in the senate last Tuesday that he had prevented the construction of new refugee camps for years to placate his party friends. The local newspaper *B.Z.* published secret documents from Lageso proving that the senator for social affairs rejected the use of suitable buildings because CDU representatives and also some SPD deputies feared the impact on their electoral district or on property prices.

As a Lageso employee wrote in one of the released emails, current CDU deputy parliamentary leader Stefan Evers had noted "the CDU representatives who own property in the area surrounding the youth hostel," in a discussion about the possibility of using a former hostel for accommodation. Further, he indicated that "it involved the electoral district of an SPD representative running in the 2013 federal election." These property owners "see a loss in value for their property and will [...] take the appropriate political course to block this plan."

Czaja also allegedly imposed an "acquisition ban" on a building on Kirchheimer Damm in 2013. Later, a CDU deputy in the federal parliament, Jan-Marco Luczak, whose electoral district was where the refugee home was planned, boasted that he had blocked it in the senate.

Last Monday, *B.Z.* issued another allegation: Czaja had assisted several hostel operators to impose the desired high daily room rates which Lageso has to pay for refugees. In June, the state accounts department accused Lageso of wasting money. RBB had already reported in March about the payment of millions to private hostel operators for the accommodation of refugees. Among the firms which came under criticism was Gireso Boardinghouse, run by Allert's stepson.

Despite growing public anger at the inhumane treatment of refugees, nothing has changed in the desperate conditions they confront. The cosmetic changes, such as the establishment of two warm tents at the Lageso, which are also open at night, or the

provision of promised medical care over the holidays are merely a drop in the bucket.

On the Fan-mile in front of the Brandenburg Gate, more warm tents and health care information points will be built in the coming days for the tourists arriving for New Year celebrations than have been put up for the refugees at Lageso over recent months.

The Berlin senate is in full agreement with Chancellor Merkel, who following her hypocritical reference to a "welcoming culture" has become the EU's spokesperson for sealing borders and accelerating deportations



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