

Pro-refugee organisation comes under political attack in Germany

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The Berlin-based refugee support organisation Moabit Hilft (Moabit Helps) has recently come under strong media criticism. In the course of the past 10 days the organisation has received threats of murder in hate mail and by telephone.

An online group calling itself “Moabit Lies” has become active,” backed by the well-known Berlin neo-Nazi Gregor Stein. It has accused Moabit Helps of dishonestly using donations. On Monday, the door of its office on the grounds of the Berlin state office for health and social care (Lageso) was kicked down. The media has also joined in the attacks on Moabit Helps.

The immediate pretext was an incident last week. A volunteer assisting refugees who was part of the circle around Moabit Helps claimed on Facebook that he had assisted a young Syrian who had been forced to wait in line at Lageso for days. The volunteer alleged the Syrian had caught a high fever and frostbite, and died in an ambulance on the way to the hospital.

But later that day, the author of the message, Dirk V., admitted to police he had made the story up. Diana Henniges, a Moabit Helps spokeswoman, said they had made a mistake in not reviewing the Facebook message more closely. However, “every volunteer, every politician and every press representative” had been able to imagine the death of a refugee. “This is the real tragedy”, she said. “It could have been possible.”

Dirk V. stated he had been pushed to the breaking point by the back-breaking work of providing assistance and wanted to use the story to “shake things up and change something.” In fact, Dirk V. had just been released from a long stay in hospital due to burnout, according to Reyna B., another volunteer who chatted with him during the night.

Reyna B. also did not initially doubt the veracity of the report of a fatality.

“For six months, we residents have watched what has happened”, she wrote in shock after Dirk’s final message. “For six months we have assisted, rushed around cared, fed, provided, healed ... and we have repeatedly said, there will be deaths if this continues. And it is downplayed, sugar coated and dismissed. It is being presented as if this is normal, just a minor administrative crisis ... ”

She referred to miscarriages, the case of the young refugee boy who was kidnapped in the chaos at Lageso last summer and murdered, several resuscitations on the Lageso grounds following heart attacks, diabetes shocks, all-night ambulance deployments to assist collapsed individuals, and the hunger endured by refugees when Lageso refused to pay out pocket money. She wrote, “Last Friday, I cried on the way home for the first time. Until then, the hope that this city, this country, would hear the humanitarian call had not been broken.”

Politicians and the media have used the incident to launch a cynical propaganda campaign against Moabit Helps. It is aimed not only at intimidating this organisation, but all volunteers assisting refugees. It also opens the door for right-wing hate mail, as Henniges told the WSW. “Cologne was the starting gun. But the report of a dead refugee has released the genie from the bottle.”

Media representatives, who went to Lageso in the morning after the report with large camera teams to sensationalise the death of a refugee, are now targeting Moabit Helps. They are accusing an organisation of volunteers, most of whom work for free and without whose efforts the provision of care to refugees would have long since collapsed, of being “unprofessional”, “haughty” and “starry-eyed.”

A report in the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* from

January 29 was especially repugnant. Under the headline “The haughtiness of the helpers”, it stated, “Many still feel the exhilaration of the summer days, when anyone who brought a case of mineral water to the Lageso felt they were better than the Berlin administration, leading to haughtiness. Several helpers have been cultivating an exaggerated image of themselves ever since, which they would never concede to a professional politician.”

The FAZ based itself on the statement of a Berlin Green Party politician, Bettina Jarasch, who described the work of the volunteers as basically “self-fulfillment”.

In a piece headlined “How to make propaganda with a lie”, N-TV wrote that the problem was not the author of the false report, but rather “an association like ‘Moabit Helps’, which did not even check the story before using it as a pretext to score points.”

The Berlin Senate exploited the incident for its own ends. On the following day, it quickly signed off on a plan to create a refugee ghetto on the grounds of the former Tempelhof airport.

Interior Senator Frank Henkl (Christian Democratic Union, CDU) called for legal consequences for Dirk V., fully aware that simply posting a false message online is not a criminal offence. He threatened the spokespeople at Moabit Helps, stating, “Whoever triggers and spreads such rumours without checking them is deliberately trying to poison the atmosphere in our city.”

Green Party and Left Party representatives complained about a lack of “professionalism” among refugee support groups. Left Party deputy Klaus Lederer declared that the matter was “unacceptable”. The Left Party paper *Neues Deutschland* described Dirk V. as a “worn-out and self-centred volunteer”.

Responding to the call for “professionalisation”, Diana Henniges said, “Only because we neglected a trifle and did not check the message? We were forced out of bed in the early hours of the morning and press representatives demanded statements by telephone. Where were these parties and media representatives six months ago, when the people at Lageso were starving, having to stand in line day and night and sleep on the ground? Nobody was talking about professionalism then. Without us, without the many people who assisted without pay in their free time, we would have a worse

situation today, the probability of deaths would be much higher.”

The Green Party and Left Party have participated in governments which have ensured the destruction of professional positions at Lageso, in schools, kindergartens and social services. Now, with their calls for “professionalism”, they are trying to co-opt the spontaneous organizations like Moabit Helps that have emerged in the population and bring them to an end. This is also a fear for them, Henniges said.

Moabit Helps was formed by residents in the longstanding Berlin working class district of Moabit at the beginning of the refugee crisis and became a role model for many other volunteer initiatives across the city. It plays a leading part in the strong solidarity towards refugees in the Berlin population, which has not diminished in the wake of the New Year’s Eve events in Cologne. They have repeatedly criticised the terrible conditions at Lageso and in the mass accommodation centres, and organised protests against them. Based on their information, 40 lawyers filed charges against those responsible in the Senate for violations of law at Lageso.

The Berlin Senate had recently come under criticism from the establishment. The pictures of people lined up at Lageso and overcrowded accommodation centres are inopportune for the capital city. If the report of the fatality of the Syrian refugee had been true, some journalists speculate, the Senate and Social Affairs Senator Mario Czaja could well have been brought down.

It is no wonder that Moabit Helps has long been a thorn in the side of the city’s political elite. For workers and young people in the city and beyond, the attack on the organisation is a warning sign. The stepped-up attacks on refugees are increasingly also directed against the general population that has spontaneously come to the aid of refugees and who, like them, oppose war and poverty.



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