

Growing opposition to Israeli government's plans to deport African refugees

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Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's plan to deport African refugees, mainly from Sudan and Eritrea, to so-called safe countries Rwanda and Uganda, has provoked a backlash.

A campaign was launched on January 18 in a letter to the government by dozens of well-known authors, including winners of the Israel Prize, Amos Oz, David Grossman and A.B. Yehoshua. It called on the government "to act morally, humanely and with compassion worthy of the Jewish people, and to stop the deportation of refugees to the hell from which they fled before it starts. Otherwise, we will have no reason to exist."

Some Holocaust survivors told the Israeli daily *Yedioth Ahronoth* that the Jewish state has a moral duty to protect the asylum seekers, with some saying they would take African refugees into their homes to hide them to prevent their deportation, while some 36 survivors wrote a personal letter to Netanyahu.

This has had a powerful impact. Hundreds of people have offered to host asylum seekers as part of the Anne Frank Home Sanctuary movement, following a call by a group of rabbis for Israelis to hide asylum seekers in their homes, just as Dutch families helped Anne Frank and her family.

Since then, thousands of workers, including El Al pilots and cabin crews, more than 1,000 doctors and medical staff, school principals, psychologists, 400 film and television personalities, 470 academics and religious figures have joined the protest. Demonstrations and protests have been held in support of the refugees.

The refugees have said they will refuse to accept the financial inducements offered by the right-wing coalition government, while legal advisers have told the High Court they would almost certainly accept a

petition against forcible deportation.

In the run-up to International Holocaust Remembrance Day, Netanyahu announced that Israel was seeking to get at least 600 Eritrean and Sudanese asylum seekers, whom it designates as "infiltrators," to leave the country each month, making a total of 7,200 a year, more than double the 3,300 that left in each of the last three years. So-called "safe countries" would be paid to take them.

The government claims that it would replace the deported workers with Palestinians at the rate of one Palestinian work visa for every two Africans that leave. But the practical difficulties in employing Palestinian workers are so great that the cynical and reactionary pledge is meaningless.

The government says it will also give every refugee who leaves voluntarily \$3,500. While women and children will not be subject to deportation, they are unlikely to remain without their husbands and fathers.

There are around 40,000 African migrants and asylum seekers in Israel, mostly fleeing civil strife and repression, according to data from the Interior Ministry, down from 60,000 four years ago, following deportations and practices aimed at forcing them to leave "voluntarily." About 72 percent are Eritrean and 20 percent are Sudanese from Darfur, most of whom arrived between 2006 and 2012, before Israel built the notorious fence across the Sinai desert to prevent them entering Israel.

Israel, despite constantly referring to the way European Jews were barred from entering the US and Britain to escape persecution in the 1930s, and signing up to the 1951 Refugee Convention, has refused to introduce asylum legislation because it would mean absorbing tens of thousands of non-Jewish refugees—threatening "the Jewish character of the state"

on which Zionist policy is based. According to human rights groups, Israel has recognised less than 200 people as refugees, in addition to some 350 Vietnamese “boat people” in the late 1970s, since its establishment in 1948.

To do so would also spur demands for the right to return of Palestinians and their descendants, who fled or were forced from their homes in the wars of 1948 and 1967.

All regulations regarding migrant workers and refugees are at the discretion of the minister of the interior, which set up the Refugee Status Determination (RSD) Unit in 2009 to interview asylum seekers and assess their claims in the light of the 1951 Refugee Convention.

The Convention’s definition of those entitled to refugee status lists those who have been subjected to persecution based on “race, religion, nationality, membership in a particular social group, or political opinion.” But the refusal to put in place legislation means that the RSD is essentially free to refuse to recognise any asylum seekers as refugees. The RSD has granted only eight asylum applications from Eritreans and two from Sudanese. In 2017, it granted a further 200 out of 6000 Darfurians “humanitarian protection,” after it became public knowledge that the government had suppressed an internal RSD report stating that Darfurians were fleeing genocide and thus qualified for asylum.

Israel’s rotten record, a less than one percent success rate for asylum seekers, is far below even that of European Union countries, where Eritrean and Sudanese asylum seekers have an 86 and 64 percent acceptance rate, respectively.

The African asylum seekers, bereft of legal status as refugees, are extremely vulnerable to exploitation. They typically live in desperately impoverished conditions, alongside poor Israelis in the suburbs in South Tel Aviv. Many live in crates, shacks and other improvised homes, without access to basic rights and treated by the police as criminals.

The asylum seekers are forced to take the worst jobs at scandalously low rates of pay and face brutal exploitation by their employers, while the Ministry of Labour turns a blind eye and the trade unions do nothing. They are required to register weekly or monthly with the RSD. They will soon be subject to a

new anti-migrant law that robs them of 20 percent of their wages and puts it in an escrow account, supposedly to be returned to them when they leave Israel.

Those without a valid visa have been subject to detention for up to a year without a judicial hearing at the Holot detention centre, the world’s largest, in the Negev desert near Israel’s border with Egypt. It is run by the prison service and designated as an open prison. Detainees are not allowed to work and must report for roll call three times a day.

Right-wing and fascistic agitators have sought to whip up xenophobia and racism, blaming the migrants for rising crime rates and dreadful social conditions, and lobbied the government to deport them.

Last August, the Israeli Supreme Court outlawed such detention at Holot for longer than 60 days, but also ruled that Israel could deport migrants—even without their consent—to third “safe” countries such as Rwanda or Uganda.

In November, the Netanyahu government claimed that an African receiving country, presumed to be Rwanda and/or Uganda—the agreement has not been made public—had agreed to accept migrants deported against their will. Under this agreement, the government will pay the receiving country \$5,000 per migrant. In the wake of the opposition to the forced deportations, the two countries have now denied there was any such agreement.

In December, parliament approved an “Infiltrators Bill” mandating the closure of the Holot detention centre—with the 1,000 Africans detained there required to leave Israel by April or face indefinite imprisonment, the forced deportation of Eritreans and Sudanese starting in March and increased restrictions on them.



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