

Israel imprisons Eritrean asylum seekers who refuse deportation orders

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Last month, Benjamin Netanyahu's right-wing Likud-led coalition government sent the first seven Eritrean asylum seekers who refused to be deported to Rwanda to be detained indefinitely in Saharonim prison in the Negev desert.

Around 750 of the 1,000 asylum seekers detained at the adjacent Holot Open Detention Centre, mostly from Eritrea and Sudan, began a hunger strike in support of the seven, refusing food and water for several days.

The government, in an unprecedented deportation operation, has begun serving notices on 600 male African asylum seekers a month. They have 60 days to choose between deportation back to their home country or a so-called safe country, assumed to be Rwanda or Uganda, with a cash inducement of \$3,500, or face indefinite imprisonment in Saharonim.

Some of the asylum seekers could be deported in early April, during the Passover holiday, which celebrates the biblical story of the Hebrews' flight from slavery in Egypt more than 3,000 years ago.

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. The number has fallen from 60,000 four years ago, following deportations and practices aimed at forcing refugees to leave "voluntarily."

About 72 percent are from Eritrea, which the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees has declared a country in humanitarian crisis, and 20 percent from Sudan, which has seen ongoing strife in the Darfur region in western Sudan, since 2003. Most arrived between 2006 and 2012, before Israel built the notorious fence across the Sinai desert to prevent them entering Israel.

Israel, despite being a signatory to the International Refugee Convention of 1951, refuses to grant refugee

status to those who flee persecution. Of the 15,613 requests for asylum, just 11 have been granted refugee status.

Last December, the Israeli parliament, which designates asylum seekers as "infiltrators," 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.

This comes on top of harsh financial restrictions aimed at making life in Israel unaffordable to African asylum seekers and getting them to leave voluntarily. In September, the High Court ruled that employers had to pay a 20 percent tax on African migrant wages, as they did for other short-term foreign workers like Filipino caretakers or Thai agricultural workers. It followed a requirement in May for employers to deposit 16 percent of African workers' pay into a closed account only to be released when he or she left Israel. The workers themselves must put 20 percent of their wage packet into this fund, drastically reducing their already meagre pay.

In January, Netanyahu announced that Israel was seeking to get at least 600 Eritrean and Sudanese asylum seekers to leave the country each month, making a total of 7,200 a year, and 20,000 by 2020. "Safe countries" would be paid around \$5,000 to take them.

According to Israel's Population, Immigration and Border Authority, there are 92,000 foreigners, mainly from the former Soviet Union, living illegally in Israel, without threats of deportation or imprisonment. They are referred to as "tourists" not "infiltrators." The government even amended the Law of Return in 1970

to widen the definition of a Jew to enable Russian immigration to Israel. However, it took until 1975 before Israel recognised the right of Jews from Ethiopia to immigrate to Israel, many of whom to this day experience racist discrimination and poverty.

Thousands within Israel and beyond have protested against Israel's plans to deport African asylum seekers.

Twenty thousand demonstrators came from all over Israel at the end of February to the Central Bus Station in south Tel Aviv, home to many asylum seekers, migrants and poor Israelis. The location meant the demonstration had a very different character than those normally held in downtown Tel Aviv. Togod Omer, an asylum seeker from Darfur, Sudan, who spoke at the rally said, "When we came, they gave us a one-way ticket to the new Central Bus Station.

"We are all victims in this story, both the asylum seekers and the veteran Israelis," referring to those living in Tel Aviv's poor southern neighbourhoods. "We're all living here together and they are always trying to get us to hate one another."

Speaker after speaker said they would rather go to prison than be deported, saying at least they would be fed in prison. This is a reference to the experiences of deportees in Rwanda and Uganda, where they had their documents confiscated and are reportedly living on the streets, without work and barely surviving. Some have even been arrested for not having the right papers.

Gabi Doron, an Israeli who had lived in south Tel Aviv for 30 years, said, "It's nice to see black and white faces demonstrating together."

Dror Sadot of Israel's Hotline for Migrants and Refugees, which provides legal aid and other support to asylum seekers and migrants, told the *World Socialist Web Site*, "It is outrageous what the government is doing to people asking for asylum. This is amid the world's biggest refugee crisis. Israel is throwing away all its legal obligations to asylum seekers. It has granted just 11 asylum seekers refugee status."

She said that other NGOs were coming forward to help and oppose the government.

The US-based Anti-Defamation League and the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Societies (HIAS) appealed to Netanyahu to drop his plans, stressing that some migrants leaving Israel had drowned at sea en route to Europe, or had been tortured by traffickers.

The semi-official Jewish Agency has joined a

growing number of Jewish organisations, mainly in the US, that have called on the government to abandon its plans to deport the asylum seekers. Its governors published a resolution following a three-day meeting, asking the Israeli government to grant legal status to just 500 African asylum seekers who arrived in the country years ago as unaccompanied minors.

Given that they were housed, fed and educated in youth villages run by the Jewish Agency and the Ministry of Education, the resolution said, "Therefore, it is right that they be granted legal status." It called on the government to ensure that "every migrant has an opportunity to apply for asylum and receive transparent due process in the examination of their application."

Israel's official Holocaust memorial, Yad Vashem, while rejecting any equating of the plight of African migrants with the plight of the Jews during the Holocaust, said that the issue requires "as much compassion, empathy and mercy that can possibly be marshalled. The experiences of the Jewish people over the ages underscore this commitment."

None of the major parties, except Meretz, have opposed the deportations. Many legislators of the Zionist Union, of which the Labour Party is a member, supported the new law. Most politicians, if not actively supporting the measures, have remained largely silent, demonstrating the depth of support within the ruling class for anti-democratic forms of rule.

The authorisation of a regime of mass indefinite detention, as is now being carried out in both Israel and its chief ally, the US, is an existential threat to workers of all national origins, regardless of immigration status, and will inevitably be used against Israeli workers as well.



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