

Inhuman conditions in Germany's largest refugee detention centre

Elisabeth Zimmermann
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Germany's grand coalition of conservative parties and the Social Democratic Party is intent on stepping up the deportation of refugees and expanding the country's system of deportation centres. At the beginning of April, the administration of the state of North Rhine-Westphalia (NRW) also decided to tighten up its rules for deportations. A report in the current edition of *Der Spiegel* deals with the dire consequences of such policies for those incarcerated in the detention centre of Büren (NRW).

The prison in Büren, near Paderborn, is currently the largest detention centre in Germany, with about 140 detainees. This number is due to increase to 175 in the near future. So far, there are eight detention prisons in Germany, which can accommodate about 400 people. The number of such prisons is to be greatly expanded, with new detention centres being built in Dresden (Saxony) and Darmstadt (Hesse), and a new facility is planned for Glückstadt in Schleswig-Holstein.

"No one may be subjected to torture or cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment." This is laid down in Article 5 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. The conditions outlined in the article in *Der Spiegel* clearly contradict this principle.

The article begins with a description of the special secure rooms located in the basement of the detention centre. In these cells, there is just a mattress and a toilet in the floor. The walls are equipped with surveillance cameras. The prisoners usually wear just paper underpants, so that they cannot strangle themselves with their clothes.

This type of detention is supposed to be a means of last resort to deal with violent prisoners, but in Büren such incarceration takes place with increasing frequency. *Der Spiegel* quotes several passages from a report by security guards, which apparently seeks to justify the inhumane practice. The report declares at the start that the situation in Büren escalated due to "death threats, riots, and attempts to escape".

In one case, a 28-year-old Egyptian prisoner asked for tea, but then threw the tea at the guard who brought it. The report

continues: "Later the detainee destroyed a television and armed himself with its remains, repeatedly threatening to kill colleagues. After reinforcement was requested, the detainee was brought down to the detention room by means of a protective suit and shield and then transferred to the special secure room 1."

In this description, one can only guess at the manic state of the young man: He was on the verge of deportation to Egypt, a country ruled by the dictator General Abdel Fattah Al-Sisi, who, since taking power in 2013, has murdered thousands of opponents of his regime. Additional tens of thousands have been imprisoned and tortured for political reasons.

All those detained in Büren face deportation. Sufficient grounds for detention is "reasonable suspicion" that someone could evade his or her deportation, and it is enough for a police officer or immigration official to express such a suspicion. As a result, those concerned lose their basic right of freedom and are often locked away for months up to their deportation.

The *Der Spiegel* report states: "Those living in deportation detention are not to be re-socialised. The prisoners have no work and have nothing to do except wait until they have to get on a plane against their will."

Men between the ages of 18 and 40 are currently detained in Büren. They originate from Algeria, Morocco, Syria, India, Bangladesh, Tajikistan, Mongolia and some other countries. They are to be deported as quickly as possible to the countries from which they have fled, because they sought security from political persecution, war or extreme hardship. In addition to Muslims, considered in the eyes of the authorities to be "Islamist threats", the centre contains Chinese workers detained following a police raid on a restaurant.

The "Accommodation facilities for people leaving the country", UfA for short, as the deportation prisons are euphemistically named in German, are centres of hopelessness and desperation. The Büren deportation prison is located about 10 kilometres outside the city, in the middle of a forest. The 6-metre-high wall enclosing the site is

reminiscent of a high-security prison. The refugees live in single cells equipped with a sink, a cupboard, a bed and a TV. The windows are barred and the cells locked at night. Most of the security guards are provided by a private security service.

The length of stay in the detention centre can be from one month to half a year and even longer, depending on the time taken by the authorities to complete the necessary formalities. During this time, the refugees must wait in prison, largely isolated, to await their deportation. It is not surprising that some then resort to acts of desperation.

One of the reports available to *Der Spiegel* centres on a Guinean inmate: “He showed significant signs of depressive moods, so self-harm is not ruled out. ... On February 11, 2018, the housed person was found completely apathetic and crying on the floor of his room. He also hit his head twice on the floor.”

Four years ago, the European Court of Justice (ECJ) ruled that deportation detention centres must clearly differ from a normal prison, but the situation for detainees in Büren has clearly not improved since then.

In January 2018, the public became aware of Büren when the lawyer of the association named “Help for people in the Büren deportation centre” laid charges against the chief of the prison with the public prosecutor’s office in Paderborn. Based on statements by former security guards, the prison head was accused of assault and mistreatment. In particular, she is said to have mixed “liquefied” medicine in the food of detainees to keep them quiet.

The association also criticised the fact among those detained in Büren were people who should not be in prison: “As an association we have taken up a total of 237 cases since 2015 and courts have determined that 60 percent of these people were illegally detained,” Frank Gockel, spokesman for the initiative, told the press.

Based on the indictment and several other reports, four members of the National Bureau for the Prevention of Torture visited the Büren detention centre on January 24-25. This organisation investigates possible ill-treatment in prisons and psychiatric clinics. Their report has not yet been published, but on site the inspectors criticised the fact that prisoners in the special secure rooms had been filmed when going to the toilet. This form of surveillance is not even practiced in prisons. One member of the delegation complained that some inmates did not know why they were in Büren.

The local administration in Detmold, which is responsible for the prison in Büren, reacted dismissively to the *Spiegel* account of abuses and violence in the detention centre. The listed cases had taken place, officials admitted, but over a period from 2016 up until now. In the eyes of the Detmold

administration, there were no “daily” incidents.

The state government, a coalition of the Christian Democratic Union (CDU) and the neo-liberal Free Democratic Party (FDP) led by premier Armin Laschet, has failed to respond to criticism of the conditions in Büren. Instead, it recently decided to tighten up its law on deportation to allow prison staff in future to punish “dangerous prisoners” even more harshly. Anyone who makes trouble is to be isolated for even longer periods, denied the use of a mobile phone and the Internet or even visits.

According to the state minister responsible for children, families, refugees and integration, Joachim Stamp (FDP), deportation centres could not be run by social workers. Stamp is the deputy premier of NRW.

This brutal treatment of refugees is supported by all political parties. The expansion of Büren into a pure detention centre originates with the former Interior Minister Ralf Jäger (SPD), who declared that “deportation detention in Germany should not fail due to a lack of places.”

In fact, there is a competition to deport among states, regardless of the political composition of their respective governments. NRW, governed by a coalition of the SPD and the Greens until May 2017, bragged at that time that it had deported more people than any other state. In 2016, 5,121 people were forcibly deported, and last year 6,308.

The systematic tightening of asylum and immigration policy in recent years has been taken even further by the current federal government. The grand coalition sitting in Berlin has effectively adopted the refugee policy of the racist Alternative for Germany.

In the coalition agreement, the SPD and Union parties decided to strictly limit the admission of refugees, drive ahead with deportations, drastically curtail family reunifications, and extend the list of supposed “safe countries of origin”. The government also wants to permanently intern refugees in central camps, so-called AnkER centres. According to Interior Minister Horst Seehofer (CSU), AnkER stands for “arrival, decision, repatriation”—i.e., “staying” in Germany is apparently not an option.



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