

Coronavirus infections surging in German refugee shelters

Martin Kreickenbaum
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At least 130 people have tested positive for COVID-19 in a refugee shelter in Sankt Augustin, near Bonn. Almost one in two COVID-19 tests was positive. The forced placement of refugees in large communal accommodation facilities exposes many people, whose health is weakened due to their history, to a deadly risk.

Last Thursday, a resident of the Sankt Augustin shelter, who suffered from fever and flu-like symptoms, tested positive for COVID-19. As there is no privacy whatsoever in the collective accommodation, with multiple occupants per room, communal kitchens and shared sanitary facilities, and it is impossible to keep a minimum distance, the health authority of the Rhein-Sieg district ordered all 489 refugees and their carers to be tested.

By Monday evening, the results of 330 people tested had been received. They show that mass housing enormously increases the probability of infection. Of the 250 refugees who were tested, 120 proved positive. Forty-seven caregivers were tested and six tests came back positive. Of 33 members of the security service who were tested, three proved positive. A further 100 refugees living in collective accommodation have not yet been tested because they were absent when the tests were carried out.

The refugee accommodation in Sankt Augustin is one of 29 Central Accommodation Units (ZUEs) in the state of North Rhine-Westphalia (NRW). The ZUEs serve as a kind of intermediate station in the refugee camp system. Although refugees housed there are subject to a so-called residence condition and are not allowed to leave the district or state, they are not locked up.

Refugees are referred to the ZUEs after they have spent one or two weeks in one of the five large initial reception centres (EAEs) in the country, where 500 to

1,000 people are crammed together in an exceedingly small space. They then remain in the ZUEs from several weeks to up to 18 months.

Responsible for the operation of the ZUEs, with almost 15,000 places nationwide, are the respective district administrations, which delegate the task to private operators. The camp in Sankt Augustin, which is in the former media headquarters of the Bundeswehr (Armed Forces), is operated by ORS Deutschland GmbH.

After the extent of the infections became known over the weekend, hectic quarantine measures began to be implemented. The refugees infected with COVID-19 are being isolated in a special part of the collective accommodation. Non-infected refugees are mostly brought to the ZUE Schleiden, near Aachen. These measures have sometimes met with resistance from those affected, as families are torn apart in the process.

“We have warned that these are breeding grounds for coronavirus,” Birgit Naujoks, the managing director of the Refugee Council NRW, told the *Süddeutsche Zeitung* on Monday. She said that the state of North Rhine-Westphalia was violating regulations that had been issued for the rest of the population to protect them from infection.

Various aid organizations are demanding that the refugee camps in Germany and all of Europe be dissolved. Helen Deffner of the Refugee Council of Saxony-Anhalt explained, “We are currently observing a deliberate threat to health, namely that a contagion is being accepted.”

In North Rhine-Westphalia, the internment of refugees since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic has been aggravated by the fact that no more refugees have been transferred from the ZUEs to decentralized shelters and apartments. This has made

overcrowding in the refugee accommodation worse.

The mass infections in Sankt Augustin are part of a series of COVID-19 outbreaks in refugee shelters in North Rhine-Westphalia. Shortly before, 50 of the 271 residents of the initial reception centre in Bonn were diagnosed with COVID-19. In Euskirchen, 50 refugees were also infected; in Mettmann, 30.

In other federal states, mass infections previously occurred in collective centres in Ellwangen in Baden-Württemberg, Hennigsdorf in Brandenburg, and Bremen and Giessen in Hesse. In the so-called anchor centre in Geldersheim, Bavaria, a refugee died of COVID-19. The victim was a 60-year-old man with previous illnesses, placing him in the high-risk group. Nevertheless, he had been accommodated in a shared room.

According to the media service Integration, approximately 40,000 refugees whose asylum proceedings have not yet been completed are accommodated in collective camps throughout Germany with several hundred to over a thousand inhabitants. Another 180,000 refugees live in collective accommodation with more than 10 people.

It is impossible for the refugees in the large collective camps to observe minimum hygiene regulations or maintain a safe distance from fellow residents. In March, a refugee criticized the conditions in a Bavarian refugee camp, saying, “The hygiene rules are a joke here. We are squatting together here in a confined space. There is no soap or disinfectant in the bathrooms, toilet paper is scarce.”

Even the isolation of refugees as a quarantine measure is not feasible in the collective centres. So-called “chain quarantines” are ordered again and again, because there are always new infections in the cramped accommodation. In Hennigsdorf, the quarantine was recently extended by 10 days, in Geldersheim it lasted for a total of five weeks.

The quarantine measures in refugee accommodation are repressively enforced by the police. In Hennigsdorf, residents who had gone through the quarantine were subsequently discriminated against by the accommodation operators by obliging them to wear a green bracelet in public.

The administrative courts in Dresden, Chemnitz, Leipzig and Münster had upheld complaints against the accommodation of refugees in collective centres during

the pandemic, branding it as illegal.

The Administrative Court in Leipzig stated at the end of April that being housed in large collective accommodation facilities “ran counter to the meaning and purpose of the Saxony Corona Protection Ordinance.” It and other courts have referenced a paragraph of the Asylum Act according to which accommodation in refugee camps can be terminated “for reasons of public health.”

Nevertheless, the federal and state governments continue to adhere unwaveringly to the camp system for refugees, placing them at particular risk. Due to traumatising and debilitating experiences in their countries of origin and during weeks or months of flight, they are often much more susceptible to infectious diseases. They are also legally worse off as asylum seekers and receive only minimal health care.

Their disenfranchisement and accommodation in shelters, exposing them to a deadly risk, are part of the brutal anti-refugee policies of the German government and the European Union, aimed at deterring others from seeking asylum.



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