

UK “hostile environment” sees two more asylum seeker deaths

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Reports of the deaths of two asylum seekers have demonstrated again the horrific consequences of the “hostile environment” that continues to exist for migrants, refugees and asylum seekers in Britain—supported by the Conservatives, Labour, and Scottish National Parties alike.

Last Saturday, Mercy Baguma, 34, was found dead beside her malnourished one-year-old baby son, Adriel, in a Glasgow flat. They were discovered after neighbours heard the sounds of the baby crying. According to refugee charity Positive Action in Housing, the child was “weakened from several days of starvation.” Luckily, the child was found in time and after being taken to hospital and discharged, Adriel is now with his father.

Originally from Uganda, Baguma had claimed asylum in the UK and was living in extreme poverty after losing her job at a restaurant—and any access to financial aid—when her leave to remain expired. She was forced to live on food donations from friends and charity organisations.

Communication between Baguma and her friends and relatives stopped on August 18, five days before her death.

According to the Positive Action in Housing (PAIH) charity, Mercy contacted them several weeks ago as she did not have enough money to look after herself or her baby.

The *Independent* reported, “Baguma contacted PAIH on 11 August to ask for help. Though asylum seekers are entitled to a small weekly stipend (£37.75 for each person in a household), she told charity workers that she had not yet received any money.”

The charity’s director Robina Qureshi, said, “Would this mother be alive if she was not forced out of her job by this cruel system that stops you from working and paying your way because a piece of paper says your leave to remain has expired? I’m sure Mercy’s son will want to ask this and other questions once he is old enough.”

A Home Office spokesperson had the gall to claim it takes “the wellbeing of all those in the asylum system extremely seriously, and we will be conducting a full investigation into Ms Baguma’s case.” But on Wednesday, while at an event in Glasgow, Work and Pensions Secretary Therese Coffey

refused to even discuss Mercy’s death or answer questions from journalists.

Mercy’s death sparked anger with a protest held yesterday outside the Home Office immigration centre in Glasgow. It quickly became a trending event on Twitter, and by 7pm on the day her death was announced more than 12,000 tweets about it had been sent across Britain. One Facebook news item had nearly 1,000 postings in response. In the space of just three days, a fund set up to pay for her funeral costs raised over £41,000 (far above an initial target of £10,000). Another fund has been set up, with all donations to go towards the future welfare needs of Mercy’s baby.

Since the onset of the coronavirus crisis, hundreds and thousands of children in migrant households in the UK have been affected by the “no recourse to public funds” stipulation, brought in by the last Labour government in Section 115 of its Immigration and Asylum Act 1999. Made stricter in 2012 by Theresa May’s Tory government, the law withdraws access to state financial aid for those subject to immigration controls.

On Sunday, in a separate case, the *Guardian* reported the death of Abdullah Ahmed Abdullah Alhabib in the Manchester hotel room where he had been placed by the Home Office after seeking asylum. The 41-year-old man was found dead on August 6. The cause of death is under investigation.

Alhabib had fled Yemen, currently suffering the worst humanitarian crisis in the world. At least 14 million Yemenis are on the brink of famine, 80 percent rely on food aid, and 1.2 million people have contracted cholera. This is thanks to a criminal war waged by Saudi Arabia and backed by the United States and the UK which has claimed at least 110,000 lives, internally displaced 3.6 million people and decimated the infrastructure of what was already the Arab world’s poorest nation. These terrible conditions are now being compounded by the pandemic.

Escaping this hellscape, Alhabib eventually crossed the English Channel to Dover on a small boat with 15 other refugees from Yemen, Syria, and Iran. One of the other

Yemeni refugees, placed in the hotel room next to Alhabib, told the *Guardian*, “The journey was terrifying. Every minute of it we felt we were hovering between life and death and could drown at any time.

“All of us on these journeys, we have lost our country, lost our family, lost our future. When we got into the boat in Calais [in France] we felt the sea was the only place left for us to go.”

Picked up by UK border force officials, they were then held in “prison-like” conditions in the notorious Yarl’s Wood Immigration Removal Centre in Bedfordshire, before being transferred to the Manchester hotel. The asylum seekers were left in constant fear about the possibility of being sent back along the chain of European countries they have passed through under the European Union’s Dublin regulation.

One told the *Guardian*, “Abdullah was frightened all the time about this. His wife and four young daughters, the oldest who is just 10, are still in Yemen. His dream was to bring them out of Yemen to safety. Now that will not be possible.”

These tragic events reveal the intolerable stress such extremely vulnerable and already desperate people are made to suffer by the asylum system in Britain. In just the last four months, the Scottish National Party government has overseen the death of 30-year-old Syrian refugee, Adnan Olbeh, in his temporary hotel accommodation in Glasgow and the tragic stabbings at the Park Inn hotel in the same city and shooting to death by police of a Sudanese asylum seeker, Badreddin Abadlla Adam.

Alhabib’s fellow asylum seeker raised his fears that, “Now that Abdullah is dead, we are worried that the same thing will happen to us. We all asked the doctor to check our hearts and our blood pressure. The Home Office has already taken six Yemeni asylum seekers from this hotel and put them in detention in Brook House immigration removal centre near Gatwick ahead of the charter flight next week. We cannot sleep. We are waiting for a knock on the door and for the Home Office to come and take the rest of us. We feel we are on death row.”

Britain continued deportations throughout the pandemic, even while the country was in lockdown, with 24 removals taking place between March 20 and April 3. A total of 285 individuals were deported between April 1 and June 30. According to the *Independent*, these included a 10-year resident of the UK who was removed to Poland on the basis of a 6-month sentence for shoplifting and forced to leave her 11-year-old son behind.

The first deportations specifically of asylum seekers since the start of the pandemic began in early August. A Yemeni national scheduled to be removed told the *Independent* he

felt suicidal after his government-allocated housing was raided by immigration officers: “I felt so scared. Everything I’ve worked so hard to reach is being demolished. I’m destroyed. I’m unable to eat or drink. I feel that there’s no meaning to my life.”

The Labour Party’s position on these questions was epitomised by its response to the right-wing medias’ manufactured “Channel migrant crisis ” two weeks ago, when a few hundred refugees tried to make it from France to England in small boats. Shadow immigration minister Holly Lynch criticised Boris Johnson’s government from the right, accusing it of a “lack of grip and competence” in dealing with the issue. Following a massive popular backlash, shadow home secretary Nick Thomas-Symonds modified the line marginally in describing the actions of the most right-wing Tory government in history—which mobilised the armed forces to prevent boats from reaching Britain—as “lacking in compassion and competence.” Party leader Sir Keir Starmer likewise called for a “compassionate response.”

Labour’s refusal to defend the basic democratic rights of migrants and asylum seekers was so pronounced that even loyal pro-Remain sections of the party, who glorify the EU’s formal commitment to free movement and migrant rights, are uncomfortable—fearing political exposure. These include the Starmer-supporting Open Labour and the Labour Campaign for Free Movement. An open letter with 300 signatures, including MPs Kate Osamor and Clive Lewis, called on “the Labour leadership, our parliamentary representatives and our trade unions to join us in condemning the government...”

Momentum, the main backers of Starmer’s nominally “left” predecessor, Jeremy Corbyn, organised a petition calling on Starmer “to end his silence on the scapegoating of refugees and migrants.”

These token moves have drawn attention to Starmer’s equally token leadership campaign pledge to “defend migrants’ rights,” including a promise to close the Yarl’s Wood detention centre, and to back last year’s Labour conference vote by members to endorse free movement and migrant rights.

The defence of migrants and refugees demands the building of a socialist movement which defends the right of all to live and work where they choose with full access to the necessary social services.



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