

Fire at Napier barracks exposes UK government's brutal treatment of asylum seekers

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A fire at the Napier barracks in Kent has shone a light on the barbaric conditions in which the Conservative government is holding hundreds of asylum seekers.

The fire broke out Friday afternoon, destroying a building and leaving roughly 300 people housed in the barracks without electricity, heating or drinking water. Many of the asylum seekers suffering these conditions are sick with COVID-19, following a massive outbreak in the barracks in January which saw at least 120 people test positive. Only a limited number of those falling ill were transferred to hotels.

Conditions in the camp were ripe for an explosion of infections. There are 16 housing blocks at the camp which house dormitories of up to 28 people, with only hanging sheets to divide the beds. Each block has two toilets and showers, and the men eat in a communal canteen at which 13 people at a time gather around two tables.

Residents have repeatedly raised concerns about hygiene and lack of access to healthcare, including psychological services. They have reported several attempted suicides and cases of self-harm. Most have been living in these conditions for four months, having originally been promised their asylum claims would be processed within a month.

In a recent confidential report for the government, the Red Cross described similar appalling conditions at Penally barracks in Wales, home to more than a hundred asylum seekers.

Dozens of humanitarian and migrant rights organisations, legal and medical professionals have demanded the closure of the barracks. Asylum seekers have carried out repeated protests against the inhuman conditions. Some residents have been on hunger strike and others have slept outside, in freezing temperatures, rather than risk infection in the crowded dormitories. Last December, a man at Penally had to be hospitalised as a result of his hunger strike.

Several demonstrations have warned of the risk of a COVID outbreak. Napier resident Jafar, from Iran, said in early January, "The danger of the virus spreading in here is

huge."

When infections took hold, the government responded by blaming the asylum seekers and locking them in the camp. Residents were told "not to leave the site under any circumstance", on pain of arrest. The canteen was closed but the men were required to queue for food, switched from hot meals to sandwiches. Nothing was done to alter the dormitories.

Minister for immigration compliance, Chris Philip, made the reprehensible statement, "It is incredibly disappointing that prior to this a number of individuals refused tests and have been either refusing to self-isolate or follow social distancing rules, despite repeated requests to do so..."

The asylum seekers responded with an open letter, which stated, "When we are becoming more and more mentally vulnerable and physically ill due to the Covid outbreak in Napier Barracks, the Home Office, specifically its secretary, Priti Patel, and the minister for immigration, Chris Philip, are intentionally ignoring us and trying their best to cover up the disaster which is happening in this army camp."

It continued, "We are all sharing the same space, we breathe in the same room, and there is no way we can practice social distancing."

The letter concluded by drawing attention to the asylum seekers' position as oppressed workers: "no one chose to leave the country that they were born in, no one chose to leave their family and loved ones behind. We came to this country to save our lives..."

"There are fathers, sons and husbands here. There are nurses, teachers, engineers and talented people and yet we have been treated like criminals or prisoners."

The fire has been met with a vicious government response. Kent police say it started following a disturbance at the barracks. Riot police were mobilised alongside firefighters on the Friday afternoon and fourteen people have since been arrested. Volunteers attempting to deliver food and blankets over the weekend say they were turned away by police

officers, who said they were treating the site as a crime scene.

Home Secretary Priti Patel delivered an outraged nationalist rant, declaring, “The damage and destruction at Napier barracks is not only appalling but deeply offensive to the taxpayers of this country who are providing this accommodation while asylum claims are being processed.

“This type of action will not be tolerated and the Home Office will support the police to take robust action against those vandalising property, threatening staff and putting lives at risk.

“This site has previously accommodated our brave soldiers and army personnel—It is an insult to say that it is not good enough for these individuals... I am fixing our broken asylum system and will be bringing forward legislation this year to deliver on that commitment.”

Clare Mosley, founder of refugee charity Care4Calais, told the *Guardian*, “For a British home secretary to accuse and castigate ordinary people when the facts of this incident are not yet even known is shocking and disturbing. It shows a senior government minister operating at the gutter level of gossip and hearsay, and at a time of heightened anxiety and tension across society, she should be ashamed of herself.

“But make no mistake, this not simply a careless, off-the-cuff emotional response. It is a misleading, opportunistic smoke screen concocted to deflect attention from the multiple warnings she has had about what was clearly going to happen at Napier barracks.”

Patel’s comments are another example of how the Tory party is basing itself politically on far right, fascist forces. Internal Home Office documents seen by the *Independent* regarding the use of disused army barracks to house asylum seekers state that they are “not analogous” to British citizens in need of welfare. They argue that providing “less generous” accommodation to these vulnerable people is “justified by the need to control immigration” and to not “undermine public confidence in the asylum system”.

By “public confidence”, the Home Office means the support of Britain’s far right. The decision to use the barracks as asylum centres came less than a month after the government apologised for an “operational failure” for placing asylum seekers in a hotel. This came in response to former United Kingdom Independence Party, Brexit and now Reform UK party leader Nigel Farage posting a video outside the hotel claiming “illegal migrants” were living there.

Farage’s action was part of a campaign of fascist intimidation in which groups like Britain First stormed hotels thought to be housing migrants to interrogate and harass the residents.

Around the time the barracks were being established as

asylum residences, Labour peer Lord West, a retired Royal Navy Admiral, said migrants should be put in “a concentrated place, whether it’s a camp or whatever”.

The government’s destruction of basic human rights and embrace of fascist politics is coupled with an escalating campaign of censorship. One day before the fire, journalist Andy Aitchison took photos of a protest held outside the barracks where fake blood was thrown at the gates and demonstrators held signs reading “Close Napier now” and “There will be blood on your hands”. The photos were shared widely online.

Six hours later, Aitchison was arrested by five police officers at his home, on suspicion of criminal damage. His phone and camera memory card were seized, and he was held at the police station for seven hours before being released on bail. He has been told not to return to Napier until the case is concluded.

Aitchison told the *Independent*, “It feels like a light has been shone on them and they’ve got the sledgehammer out. It’s censorship: if you don’t toe the line, we shut you down.”

This is not the first attempt to suppress information about what is happening at Napier. Last November, volunteers at the barracks were told to sign confidentiality agreements, underpinned by the Official Secrets Act, preventing them from speaking about conditions they observed.

There is huge popular opposition to the government’s treatment of asylum seekers. A petition from campaign group Freedom from Torture, “Close asylum camps, save lives”, has received more than 21,000 signatures.

Defending migrants and refugees requires the construction of a socialist movement in the working class. The attack on asylum seekers is part of a global turn to fascist forms of rule, of which the January 6 attempted coup in America is the highest expression. This turn is bound up with the pandemic crisis, which has drastically worsened social inequality, seen workers all over the world thrown into poverty and necessitates a fresh savage assault on living conditions.

Only the combined force of the international working class can confront these dangers and advance the right of all workers to a good standard of living in whatever country they choose.



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