

Germany: Deportation centre opens in Bavaria

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17 September 2002

Last week, Interior Minister Guenter Beckstein publicly unveiled the Bavaria's first deportation centre. The camp in Fuerth will hold up to 100 refugees prior to their "voluntary departure".

Beckstein, who is spokesman on domestic security in the election team of Edmund Stoiber, Christian Social Union (CSU) candidate for German chancellor, and who is known for his xenophobic slogans, has been able to base himself on the new immigration laws passed by the Social Democratic Party-Green Party federal government. Whereas only a few deportation centres had operated previously, the new SPD-Green immigration laws expressly call for the creation of Sammellager (collection camps) by the individual states to confine "foreigners awaiting deportation".

The departure centres will house refugees whose asylum claims have been turned down, but who cannot be sent back to their countries of origin since they lack travel and identity documents. Such refugees are regarded as guilty of having deliberately thrown away their papers to escape the threat of deportation. The authorities take no account of the fact that some countries do not issue travel papers or remove them from refugees on their departure, or that some refugees could not apply for documentation due to their rapid escape.

In order to be able to deport these people, the possibility of detention pending deportation was created. This has the disadvantage for the state that it requires a judicial order, and is limited to a duration of 18 months. If no realistic chance exists of the deportation order being completed, such detention—at least in theory, although it already looks somewhat different in practice—is to be ended immediately. Otherwise it assumes the character of illegal preventative detention.

These limitations can be circumvented by the new deportation centres, since the authorities can compel refugees to live in Sammellager for an unlimited period until their "voluntary departure" or they are forcibly deported.

Previously only six deportation facilities had been established in Germany: at Minden-Luebbecke in North-Rhine Westphalia, at Ingelheim in the Rhineland-Palatinate,

at Halberstadt in Saxony Anhalt and at Bram, Oldenburg and Braunschweig in Lower Saxony (Chancellor Schroeder's home state).

Originally, these centres were only intended for single men, but entire families and even unaccompanied minors can now be found in the Sammellager.

The authorities themselves create the grounds for deportation. The state government in Lower Saxony has admitted "those of working age are excluded from employment by application of aliens regulations." In the standard letter to those facing confinement in a Sammellager, refugees can read that they are "dependent on public means for their living costs, and thus their illegal stay represents a burden for the country."

In order to shorten the stay of refugees by any means possible, Bram even receives asylum-seekers whose claims are still being processed. The same will happen at the collection camp in Fuerth.

At these "departure centres", refugees face the "subtle pressure" of being concentrated in one place—as Sigurd Ilek, spokesperson for the Federal Office for the Recognition of Foreign Refugees, put it—which should either encourage them to obtain a passport or induce them to depart voluntarily.

In practice, subtle pressure means a complete ban on undertaking work or attending German language courses, thus wearing down the refugees through inactivity. Freedom of movement is limited to the city or district in which they are registered. Social security benefits are drastically reduced and not paid in cash but goods in kind. Only the most necessary medical assistance is available and is possible only with official permission.

The meagre pocket money of 40 euros, which refugees are entitled to under asylum legislation, is either withheld from the start or is threatened to be withheld at weekly case hearings due to alleged "non-cooperation" with the authorities. Work for the benefit of the community (obligatory for refugees under asylum legislation, paying the shameful rate of one euro) is either forbidden or also used as

means of applying pressure on asylum-seekers.

The destitution this produces in turn prevents refugees from seeking legal assistance, although legal action is the only redress against being sent to such a centre.

Refugees often face charges of hiding their identities when they are sent to such centres. They are forced into conditions of semi-legality, when the word “allegedly” is inserted after their name on the identity papers issued by the aliens department. This denies all those in such departure centres a residency permit and certificate of identity, thereby denying them basic legal and employment rights.

Although these are not supposed to be deportation detention centres, everything is done to lend them the character of a prison—high fences, guards, video monitoring, exit controls and checks on visitors, simple platform beds in dormitory rooms. Arbitrary room searches dispel any sense of privacy.

The cynical complaint of the state government in Rhineland-Palatinate is that the public image of the camp at Ingelheim does not genuinely project their humane policy towards foreigners.

How effective these repressive institutions are can be seen from an evaluation paper drawn up by refugee advocate Martini Emden: “The clear restrictions on benefits, the exclusion from work, as well as the gradually developing consciousness of the hopelessness of their life prospects in Germany produces a certain mood of despondency and disorientation among those housed in the centres.”

Some 727 refugees were sent to the model projects at Minden-Luebbecke, Braunschweig, Oldenburg and Ingelheim, for which relatively current statistics are available, up to April 2002. Of these, 381 (52 percent) went underground, either after receiving instructions to move to one of the Sammellager or shortly after moving in. Sixteen (2.2 percent) “voluntarily” left the country and 62 (8.5 percent) were deported. The remainder were distributed between various local authorities or forced to continue living in the departure centres. In only approximately 20 percent of cases could the refugee’s identity be definitely established.

The authorities count it as a success when a refugee goes into illegality, in preference to returning to their home country to face persecution, civil war and misery, or the undignified existence in the departure facilities, since they assume they have made an uncontrolled departure from Germany.

The authorities in any case no longer have to pay out from the public purse. As the interior ministry in Lower Saxony indicated in a study in September 2001, refugees who continue to live in Germany illegally “do not make any claim for welfare benefits”. The state government in Rhineland-Palatinate also stresses the permanent savings of

social security benefits in its report.

Refugees are regarded only as an economic burden that must be eliminated through deportation or by being driven into illegality. According to Andrea Kothen of the refugee organisation Pro Asyl, “The target is the removal of refugees from the public stage.... The abuse of their social rights is used consciously as an instrument to achieve this.”

Being sent to a departure centre can threaten a refugee’s life. A Syrian refugee who abandoned his identity in the departure centre was arrested and tortured after being deported. In Minden-Luebbecke, an immigrant who could no longer withstand the “subtle pressure” committed suicide.

Following protests by the remaining inhabitants against the inhuman conditions, which finally culminated in threats to burn down the whole facility, the departure centre was closed after 18 months. But even this was not enough for the SPD-Green state government in North Rhine-Westphalia to abandon the concept. They are now seeking new locations. The organisation responsible for running the facility, the German Red Cross, regards the lack of sanctions it is able to impose on refugees as the reason for the failure of the facility and is calling for stronger repressive measures.

The authorities claim that resentment towards foreigners for “abusing asylum” and “obtaining residency rights through devious means” will be prevented by the creation of more departure centres. In reality, the departure facilities promote xenophobia, since the concentration of asylum-seekers in prison-like Sammellager gives rise to a general criminalisation of refugees.

A further deportation centre in South Bavaria is to follow the one in Fuerth, and there are plans to establish more in other German states, regardless of the catastrophic balance sheet of these facilities.

It is worth noting that the facility in Fuerth is the first to be opened in a state controlled by the Christian Democrats. All previous centres were established in states with social-democratic-led governments, some in coalition with the liberal Free Democratic Party or Green Party. In view of this, protests by the Greens in the Bavarian state parliament against the new camp at Fuerth are hypocritical. Even more so since Green Party spokesperson Claudia Roth criticised conditions at the Bram departure centre following her visit in September 2001, but instead of calling for the facility to be closed merely demanded some small improvements.



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