

# EUROPEAN RACE BULLETIN

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**RACE**  
RELATIONS

A special report on the UK and Ireland

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## *The dispersal of xenophobia*

BURDEN ■ INFLUX ■ HORDES ■

■ THRESHOLD ■ HUMAN SEWAGE ■ PARASITES ■ RISING TIDE ■

At the same time as the governments of Ireland and the UK move towards the continental model for the reception of asylum-seekers, dispersal systems in Germany and the Netherlands are imploding. In east Germany, 116 asylum-seekers living in the Brandenburg town of Rathenow have pleaded for a transfer to a safe region, in the face of escalating racial violence and anonymous threats to burn down the asylum hostels where they live. In the Netherlands, during an emergency parliamentary debate in May, the obstacles to the further dispersal of asylum-seekers were examined, in the light of the events in the small Frysian village of Kollum described in Bulletin no. 32.

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# THE DISPERSAL OF XENOPHOBIA

In Spring 2000, the governments of the UK and Ireland set in motion a new system for the reception of asylum-seekers. Despite warnings from NGOs and refugee organisations that dispersal of asylum-seekers on a no-choice basis to designated accommodation across the country would leave asylum-seekers isolated, socially excluded and vulnerable to racist attack, the UK Home Office and Ireland's Department of Justice pressed ahead with these controversial plans. In this special report, we document the factors that lay behind the xenophobic campaigns in Ireland mounted against asylum-seekers as a result of their dispersal and report on the corroding effects, both for political and popular culture, of the Dutch auction between the political parties over asylum numbers in the UK. And we draw parallels with the situation in the Netherlands where the Party for a Safe and Caring Society 2000 has been formed to oppose the creation of any more reception centres for dispersed asylum seekers.

IRR's research shows that a deep-rooted xenophobia has risen to the surface in rural, coastal and port areas of Europe as a result of dispersal. But there are complex reasons why this xenophobia is manifesting itself now. Its source lies not just in the insular and conservative culture of these areas. It can be located too in the state's attitude to asylum-seekers and the way in which asylum issues are being debated by political parties for electoral gain.

## ***(I) How the state creates xenophobia***

In the UK and Ireland the government ministers responsible for asylum policy, the UK Home Office's Jack Straw and the Irish Department of Justice's John O'Donoghue, have not presented dispersal as a process that could enrich local communities. On the contrary, governments have preceded a decision to disperse asylum-seekers with a profoundly negative debate about asylum-seekers, describing them as a 'flood' and stereotyping them as criminals - 'bogus' and 'illegal' claimants.

### **•By utilising the language of deterrence**

Indeed, dispersal and the removal of asylum-seekers from mainstream social welfare benefits, is not, as UK Home Office minister Jack Straw openly admits, a positive response to asylum-seekers or a way of encouraging them to help revitalise the UK economy by settling in parts of the country experiencing depopulation and social decline. Rather, dispersal, Straw acknowledges, has been introduced as part of a deterrent asylum strategy to make the UK less attractive to asylum-seekers and to stop bogus claims. And in Ireland, as the *Irish Times* points out 'Irish people have been subjected to a steady diet of media stories reflecting the Department of Justice's view that those arriving represent a flood or a crisis.'

This language of deterrence, this constant reference to the 'flood' or 'influx' or 'tide' of 'bogus' 'illegal' and 'fraudulent asylum claims' hardly contributes towards the creation of a positive political climate whereby local communities are encouraged to welcome asylum-seekers. Instead, it has set the tone for the overwhelmingly negative representation of asylum-seekers in local newspapers in areas to which they are dispersed. Katryn Holmquist, a columnist for the *Irish Times* who regularly surveys coverage of important issues in the local and regional media, found that coverage in nearly all local papers to the government dispersal of asylum-seekers to their areas was negative. And in the UK when the Audit Commission analysed 161 local newspaper articles collated by the Refugee Council in October/November 1999, it found that in only 6 per cent of stories did journalists cite any positive contribution made by asylum-seekers and refugees. On the other hand, 28 per cent of stories focused on housing and/or employment difficulties and 15 per cent concerned crime and offences committed by asylum-seekers.

### **• By feeding paranoia through lack of consultation**

But if the governments of Ireland and the UK have made prejudice acceptable by the language of deterrence, from the Netherlands, Ireland and the UK come further criticism of governments which have under-resourced the dispersal system and handled it arrogantly and in a top-down manner, with barely any attempts at consultation with local communities in reception areas. In mid-April, the *Irish Times*, reporting on resistance to asylum-seekers in Rosslare, Carlow, Athlone, Tramore, Ennis, Kilcare and Tralee, warned that the government's failure both to consult on dispersal and to articulate a new vision of a multi-cultural society was 'feeding a sense of anxiety which verges on paranoia in small, local communities, where rumours are running wild every time a piece of land goes up for sale that it will be purchased for asylum-seekers'. Indeed, at the same time as the Irish government announced its dispersal policy, it refused to name the locations where temporary centres would be created, leading the *Irish Times* to warn that this 'lack of candour or willingness to be publicly accountable on this most sensitive social issue of the day is a factor in heightening local concerns and distrust'.

### **• By failing to make social provision**

The dispersal of asylum-seekers is acting as the barium meal exposing the poverty and infrastructural decay in many parts of the poorer areas of western Europe. When governments fail to meet the social costs of the reception of asylum-seekers, then asylum-seekers are unjustly blamed for social decay. In Ireland and the UK, NGOs and refugee organisations had pointed out, prior to dispersal, that the lack of social provision and specialist care outside major cities would lead to a backlash against asylum-seekers who would be blamed for stretching already under-resourced health and social services to new limits. In the UK, the influential Audit Commission, an independent body established in 1983 to appoint and regulate the external auditors of local authorities in England and Wales and to promote the best uses of public finances, has added its influential voice to the argument. On the basis of research in 15 fieldwork sites - ten councils and five health authorities - the Audit Commission has warned that the dispersal of tens of thousands of asylum-seekers away from London and the South East, will lead to increased racial

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tensions unless there were an immediate injection of cash to help recently-established consortia cope with new arrivals. The absence of mental health services, English language support, legal representation and refugee community support in the dispersal areas was highlighted, as was the lack of school places for the children of asylum-seekers and the fact that many GPs practices were closing their lists to asylum-seekers. In addition, in the UK, several investigative reports in national newspapers have highlighted the private profiteering that government policy has given rise to as the Home Office hands over lucrative dispersal contracts to poorly-regulated private companies. In Liverpool, for instance, a company was found to be housing asylum-seekers in one of the poorest inner-city areas of western Europe in two crumbling 15-storey tower blocks, abandoned ten years ago by the local authority as unfit for council tenants.

### ***(II) The corroding effects of the numbers debate***

A key aspect in the growing xenophobia against asylum-seekers is the constant attention national politicians and the media give to numbers of asylum-seekers seeking refuge in Europe. The debate on asylum has become synonymous with the debate about numbers and this is having a corrosive effect on political and popular culture, with local government and representatives of grassroots residents' campaigns attempting to negotiate with the state in order that their communities take in the lowest number of asylum-seekers possible. In these negotiations, use is made of the popular argument that integration of asylum-seekers is hindered by the concentration of too many foreigners in any one locality - for it is the numbers of asylum-seekers, we are told, which gives rise to xenophobia and hostility. This convenient myth, as our case studies from the Netherlands, Ireland and the UK show, diverts governments from their over-riding responsibility towards asylum-seekers: namely, to provide a safe haven for those seeking refuge in Europe. Until governments tackle the deep-seated racism, particularly in monocultural, overwhelmingly white, rural, seaside and port areas, they have no business to expose asylum-seekers to the hazards of dispersal.

### ***Case 1: The United Kingdom***

The constant vying between political parties about which is tougher on asylum numbers is particularly disappointing in the UK which has had past experience of the devastating consequences of the 'numbers game' in creating a culture of popular racism. The very idea of the 'numbers game' is associated with a period in the 1960s and '70s, referred to as Powellism (after the Conservative MP, Enoch Powell, who was dismissed from the Conservative Party for calling for the repatriation of immigrants). Powell's opposition to the number of black immigrants coming to the country, his concentration on immigrant birth rates and the threat 'they' posed to the British way of life, dominated media debate and led to outbursts of racial violence and racially-motivated murders of immigrants from Asia, Africa and the Caribbean. Yet, unbelievably, politicians have learnt nothing from this earlier period and the 'numbers game' has taken root in the UK again today.

### ***The Dutch auction over numbers***

In the run-up to local elections in 152 English councils in May 2000, the issue of asylum-seekers dominated political debate - with the Conservatives and the Labour Party blaming each other for the large numbers of 'illegal' asylum-seekers alleged to be resident in the UK. The debate reached such base levels that the Liberal Democrat Party called on the Commission for Racial Equality to carry out an investigation into whether the Labour Party and the Conservatives were inciting racism and the UNHCR condemned the xenophobic tone of debate. It was the declared intention of the Conservative leader William Hague, to make asylum the prominent election issue by, for instance, warning that asylum-seekers were costing taxpayers £180 million a year, that old age pensioners now get less money than refugees and by visiting Conservative-controlled seaside resorts described by Conservatives as 'dumping grounds' for asylum-seekers. But the response of the Labour Party to Hague's campaign was to point to its tough approach on bogus asylum claims - throwing its numbers at Tory numbers. In an unseemly Dutch auction which could only degrade public debate still further, the two main political parties vied with each other as to which could curtail numbers, seemingly oblivious to the effect that this would have in promoting xenophobic reactions to asylum-seekers on the ground. On the contrary, xenophobia and racial violence against asylum-seekers were used by Labour to justify its dispersal policy on the grounds that smaller concentrations of asylum-seekers would be integrated more successfully into local communities and would ensure that asylum-seekers were no longer a magnet for extreme-Right groups like the National Front which have been demonstrating in areas like Dover. But the government's approach, far from countering xenophobia, legitimises it by implying that there is something innate about an asylum-seekers' foreignness - handleable perhaps, in small concentrations. but provoking hostility when numbers accumulate beyond a certain threshold - which generates xenophobia.

### ***Local authorities and xenophobia***

The Dutch auction over asylum numbers, coupled with the popular argument that too great a concentration of asylum-seekers in any one place generates xenophobia, informs the approach some local authorities, principally in seaside, port and rural areas of the UK, are taking towards asylum-seekers. Prior to the introduction of the national dispersal system in April 2000, around ninety per cent of asylum-seekers were housed in London where there was no mass xenophobic reaction against them. However, many London local authorities, experiencing a severe shortage of temporary housing accommodation, began to unofficially disperse asylum-seekers to the South East, to seaside resorts and port towns which were overwhelmingly white, Conservative and monocultural, but where the cost of accommodating asylum-seekers was less. To these London asylum-seekers were added asylum-claimants who entered at ports of entry like Dover. It was a recipe for disaster. Ethnic minorities in Dover, prior to the arrival of asylum-seekers, comprised just 0.6 per cent of a total population which, in the words of one local MP, has 'no culture,

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experience or history of receiving visitors'. But when hostility towards asylum-seekers, fuelled by the *Dover Express* which described asylum-seekers as the 'backdraft of a nation's human sewage', reached new levels, not one government spokesperson was prepared to denounce xenophobia in sections of a Dover population which were not just hostile to asylum-seekers but to the very idea of a multicultural society. Instead, the government kow-towed to pressure from Kent County Council and afforded the County special status whereby it would no longer take more asylum-seekers but hand over responsibility for part of entry and in-country applicants to the new National Asylum Support Service. The Kent approach was quickly imbibed by twenty other local authorities which immediately applied to the government for special status on the ground that they too had reached saturation point. These applications were refused. But the damage had already been done. Labour, by pandering to the Conservative's numbers game, has set a shameful lead; consequently, it has provided local authorities with a stick to beat it with when negotiating for reduced numbers.

### **Case 2: The Netherlands**

In the Netherlands, local authorities are also taking their lead from a government debate which focuses not on tackling the xenophobic campaigns in rural and seaside communities described in past issues of the Bulletin but in refining a system whereby municipalities are afforded a quota of asylum-seekers they must accommodate in Asylum-Seekers Residence Centres (AZCs) by introducing measures to improve the concentration and distribution of asylum-seekers.

#### **Refining the numbers debate**

Here too, the government approach legitimises the view that xenophobia arises when a community is pushed beyond its 'threshold of tolerance' for asylum-seeker absorption. So while the government has rejected opposition calls for a reduction in asylum numbers sent to rural communities, it argues that what is key is how these numbers are concentrated and distributed. Thus, the ruling-PvdA group on Kollumerland Council, in its thankless efforts to find a solution to the deadlock over the introduction of a new AZC, has bowed to the argument that the only solution would be for the government to make Kollum a special case and reduce the number of asylum-seekers sent there. But if the government accedes to this request it will give the green light to further xenophobic campaigns against dispersal. Those who stoned the children of asylum-seekers, rallied against the creation of a new AZC with banners urging the Kollumerland Council to 'Listen to your own population', those who violated Dutch anti-discrimination laws, will all have been rewarded.

### **Case 3: Ireland**

If government policy is based on the stigmatisation of asylum-seekers as bogus and the idea that numbers can no longer be absorbed, then hostile reactions by local communities to dispersed asylum-seekers is hardly surprising. For state-sponsored xenophobia has a trickle-down effect. And what is even more disastrous for asylum-seekers is that once the government's xenophobic message is absorbed by rural communities, it triggers off older prejudices, stereotypes and suspicions of outsiders traditionally vented on socially excluded groups, like Gypsies and Travellers. In Ireland, the xenophobia sponsored by the state is being overlaid on a fabric of rural racism - and the combination is explosive.

#### **A cocktail of prejudices**

Since the so-called direct provision policy for the reception of asylum-seekers was introduced in April, the Department of Justice has had to find 8,000 short-term places for asylum-seekers in the space of a year and plans to construct 4,000 places of permanent accommodation as quickly as possible, with flotels (floating hostels), prefabs and pavilion-style villages with canvas tops all being considered. We have documented on pages 6-11 opposition between March and April to the dispersal of asylum-seekers in Co. Wexford, Co. Cork, Co. Carlow, Co. Waterford, Midlands, Co. Tipperary, Dublin, Kerry and Co. Kildare (although the picture is not all bleak; we report on support campaigns too.) While we readily acknowledge - and our summary of events bears this out - that the motives for opposition to dispersal have not been one-dimensional, we cannot agree with those in the Irish regional press which attribute the unrest solely to the government's lack of consultation or plead for tolerance of local suspicion on the grounds that rural Ireland has been treated contemptuously by successive governments. While this may well be true, it should not be used to legitimise xenophobia towards asylum-seekers which has found expression through ideas of:

**(i) Culture swamping** : In post-Holocaust Europe, those seeking to express extreme views or target minorities for hate campaigns tend to couch their arguments, not in terms of racial superiority but with the more socially acceptable view that people from different cultures don't mix. In Ireland, some local papers are following in this tradition by posing the Department of Justice as engaged in a conspiracy to plant alien cultures on rural communities, thereby swamping rural Ireland with large numbers of aliens with a different culture. When a plan to accommodate 300 asylum-seekers in mobile homes in a former army barracks in Co. Kerry was revealed, the *Kerryman* backed protests by the villagers of Ballymullen, near Tralee, seemingly agreeing with the argument that unless villagers stood up for their rights they risked becoming a minority in their own community. The *Nationalist*, repeating the message of an Irish emigrant to New York who on the letters page of the *Irish Examiner* urged the people of Clogheen to 'protect the culture of their communities', condemned the bullish Irish state for picking on a small rural area with no infrastructure in order to 'plant a lot of people' from a 'different culture' who have barely any money and will have nothing to do all day. And in a case with parallels to the events in the Czech town of Usti nad Labem, where a wall the size of a street was erected to separate Czech citizens from 'unsocial Roma', some residents in one Co. Kildare village asked that a wall be built around the site of a disused army barracks set to be turned into a permanent asylum centre (it was already temporary home to

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300 Kosovan refugees), in order to protect their privacy.

**(ii) Threshold of tolerance** : The political parties' obsession with numbers, is also reflected in local protests which implicitly take the view that there is a threshold of tolerance beyond which a community cannot go. Just how low that threshold is, has been illustrated by the villagers of Ballymullen who, as we have seen, opposed the accommodation of 300 asylum-seekers in a former army barracks, and the villagers of Clogheen, Co. Tipperary, where an arsonist set fire to the Vee Valley Hotel just hours before the Department of Justice's Directorate for Asylum Support Services (DASS) was due to debate with locals about the hotel's purchase for transformation into a reception centre for asylum-seekers. During the subsequent Clogheen meeting, which went ahead despite the arson, the DASS was told that, as only 400 people lived in Clogheen, the village should not be expected to take in more than ten asylum-seekers. There was loud applause when one woman asked how many asylum-seekers dispersed to Clogheen would be rapists, paedophiles or murderers. Meanwhile in Ballymullen - a village which has recently received Heritage status - a proposal to accept 27 asylum-seekers (equal to ten per cent of the village population) was rejected by villagers who backed the counter proposal - that the village should accept none.

In seaside resorts and port towns, the tourist industry backs campaigns for a reduction in numbers of asylum-seekers on the grounds that, as Paddy Butler, acting chair of the Riverstown Committee in Tramore, Co. Waterford, put it, seaside-resorts can't afford to have asylum-seekers hanging out on the beach, getting bored and turning to stealing. Tramore Tourism said that while it opposed the DASS's plan to house asylum-seekers in two guest houses it planned to purchase, it would have no objection to six or seven families being properly integrated in the community. In such seaside-resorts, the problem of asylum-seekers' visibility is key - with residents refining their arguments in a variant of the Dutch premise that numbers of asylum-seekers is not the main issue but how they are concentrated. Hence, the residents' committee formed at Rosslare Harbour, Co. Wexford, to oppose the sale of the Deveroux Hotel to the DASS for transformation into an asylum reception centre attempted to force the DASS to change tack by identifying an alternative site for the reception centre in the hinterland of Rosslare Harbour. The idea presumably being that out of sight is out of mind!

**(iii) Carriers of disease** : The idea that immigration should be curtailed as immigrants are the carriers of infectious diseases has long been part of the classic scare mongering of fascist parties and anti-immigration lobbies. In Ireland, the Immigration Control Platform (ICP) has attempted to whip up prejudices in the Clonakilty area of Co. Cork by distributing leaflets warning that Aids is rampant in many of the countries Ireland receives asylum-seekers from. The Clonakilty Friends of Asylum Seekers, however, say that the ICP's views are not representative of local opinion. But the fact that fear of hepatitis, tuberculosis and, most often, a fear of Aids has raised itself at many meetings to discuss dispersal, suggests that the ICP has a steady stream of prejudice and fear to tap into. For instance, when Clogheen residents met with the DASS, they demanded a guarantee from the department that asylum-seekers were not carriers of infectious diseases. And in Co. Kildare, 300 people, including 70 children, carried placards stating 'Health are we at risk' as they marched to oppose the creation of a permanent reception centre at another former army barracks, warning 'Your town will be next!'

Such hysteria, however, is not without its contradictions. On the one hand, demands were made, at a consultation meeting at Rosslare, for the compulsory Aids testing of asylum-seekers; but residents also expressed the view that asylum-seekers arriving at Rosslare harbour (about one in ten of all asylum applicants in 1999 entered Ireland via the port of Rosslare) looked too healthy to need help. There was scant charity for the privations the asylum-seekers had experienced on account of their voyage. When an ambulance driver spoke of how he had to take a young child to hospital suffering from severe dehydration there were cries of 'Turn the boats around and turn them back!'

#### **Sources:**

*De Volkskrant* 29.3.00

*Irish Examiner* 26.4, 2, 4, 5.5.00

*Irish Independent* 26.4.00

*Irish Times* 4, 6,7., 21.2, 24.3., 4,7,8,11,12,13,14,17, 19,21,26,29.4., 2,3,8.5.00

*Financial Times* 1.5.00

*Guardian* 7.6.00

*Leeuwarder Courant* 29.3, 1.4.00

*Observer* 28.5.00

*Sunday Business Post* 19.3.00

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## Additional data on Ireland

### Asylum and immigration

#### Xenophobic reactions to new asylum reception plans

Following a major review of asylum policy, the Irish government announced at the end of March its plans for a national dispersal system for asylum-seekers and direct provision of food, clothes and shelter in place of cash payments. But, already, there is concern that the ad-hoc nature of the government's dispersal policy, the lack of public consultation and the absence of state services beyond the Pale, is leading to the immiseration of asylum-seekers and the emergence of xenophobic campaigns against them. Local residents' committees - most notably at Rosslare harbour - have been formed to challenge government purchase of property for use as asylum-seekers' residence centres and the xenophobic Immigration Control Platform, which is distributing leaflets linking asylum-seekers to Aids and disease, is attempting to foment hatred further.

#### Government ignores warnings

Despite opposition from each of the 40 NGOs consulted on the issue, the government pressed ahead with the dispersal and direct provision policy under which asylum-seekers will receive full board with a small cash payment (described as 'comfort money') of £15 a week for adults and £7.50 per child. In a letter sent to the Department of Justice in November 1999, the Irish Catholic Bishops Refugee Project warned that unless attempts were made to involve local communities in dispersal, and unless social provision was made for refugees, there would be an upsurge in racism. According to the Irish Council for Civil Liberties, direct provision is both 'discriminatory and unnecessary'. No one else in the state is in receipt of social welfare payments paid through direct provision. In February, over 550 community social welfare officers, belonging to the two trades unions, IMPACT and SIPTU, threatened to boycott the system, saying that officers felt angry that they were being asked to administer a system which is blatantly discriminatory and effectively confines recipients to the small provincial towns to which they have been consigned. After 120 asylum-seekers were placed in emergency accommodation in Galway city and county in the space of six weeks, the Galway Refugee Support Group also pointed to the lack of facilities for asylum-seekers in dispersed areas leading to ill-health. As hotel and hostel accommodation has no facilities for cooking, children are falling ill from eating food that they are not accustomed to.

#### Rosslare harbour, Co. Wexford

The backlash against asylum-seekers was symbolised by the protest movement which quickly emerged at the Wexford port of Rosslare where the government is pressing ahead with a plan to convert a hotel into a residence centre to process asylum-seekers despite the formation of a local committee to oppose the plan and the threat of a legal challenge to the sale.

Sale of Devereux Hotel opposed: About one tenth of the estimated total number of asylum applicants for 1999 entered through the County Wexford port of Rosslare. (Others arrive through Dún Laoghaire and from the North.) As news percolated through to the local community that the Devereux Hotel - situated prominently on a hilltop near Rosslare harbour - had been purchased by the Irish state and was to be converted into an asylum residence centre, residents at Rosslare harbour staged a round-the-clock protest outside the hotel. Around 400 people attended a public meeting to discuss the plan - a sizeable turnout given that Rosslare harbour and nearby Kilrane have a total population of 2,500.

Did the government mishandle the situation? From the start, spokespersons for the residents' committee have denied that the campaign is xenophobic, arguing that while Rosslare should indeed take its share of asylum-seekers, the choice of this particular hotel and the lack of public consultation over the plan, had inflamed local opinion. Even those who have denounced the ugly xenophobic sentiments openly expressed at the Rosslare public meeting, admit that the government does have a case to answer on this issue. Rosslare, councillor David Hynes, a member of the Wexford Corporation, who has taken a principled stance in opposing the 'open hostility towards refugees' expressed at the Rosslare public meeting, also condemns the ham-fisted way in which the government handled the matter. The Devereux was not just a hotel but a local amenity used by community groups and young people and the fact that the community valued the hotel, and the local jobs it provided, was legitimate. But what was not legitimate was xenophobia and stereotyping openly expressed at the public meeting.

Open racism at public meeting: Residents at the public meeting, supported by businesses, said that they were not racist, but the presence of asylum-seekers in a hotel in a prominent location, would seriously damage the tourist trade. On the one hand, demands were made for compulsory Aids testing of asylum-seekers who were accused of bringing in diseases, while, on the other, refugees arriving at Rosslare port were accused of looking too healthy to need help, and fears were expressed for the safety of schoolchildren if asylum-seekers were found to be hanging around schoolgates. Those who attempted to speak out in favour of asylum-seekers were shouted down. When a Fianna Fáil member of the county council, who works as an ambulance driver, tried to speak of the terrible condition some refugees arrived in (including a young child who was taken to hospital with

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dehydration), there were shouts of 'Turn the boats around and turn them back'. There was fervent applause when a man suggested that asylum-seekers should be prevented from entering the hotel, local people should refuse to work there and local shops should not supply food.

Protest set to escalate: The residents' committee went on to meet with local TDs and by mid-April they informed the Department of Justice that they had identified an alternative site for the reception centre 'in the immediate hinterland' of Rosslare harbour. But the Department of Justice rejected the alternative proposal and a spokesperson for the residents' committee said a 'confrontation was now unavoidable'. There was a further row with the government after the Rosslare residents sent a statement to the Irish Times which said that 97 per cent of asylum-seekers entering via Rosslare port were not genuine; that two out of three cases of credit-card fraud were committed by Nigerians; and that in Rosslare, asylum-seekers tended to be 'well-dressed gentlemen' with gold bracelets, neck chains and earrings being the order of the day.

#### Co. Cork

Immigration Control Platform active in Clonakilty: The Immigration Control Platform has been accused of 'classic scare mongering aimed at turning rural communities against asylum-seekers' after distributing inflammatory literature in the Clonakilty area of Co. Cork, where some eighty asylum-seekers have recently been sent. The recently-formed Clonakilty Friends of Asylum-Seekers say that the leaflets do not represent local feeling. Flyers distributed by the group, which is led by teacher Aine Ní Chonail, who lives in Clonakilty, state that Aids is rampant in several of the countries Ireland receives asylum-seekers from. Chonail promised to distribute 5,000 more leaflets across county Cork and in Dublin.

Residents' Committee formed in Rochestown: The Norwood Court Residents' Association is opposing plans to convert the Havisham House Hotel in Norwood Court into a reception centre for asylum-seekers. The group boycotted a consultation meeting with the Department of Justice's directorate for asylum support service because, they said, the Department did not have the power to convert the hotel into a hostel as it had not applied for planning permission.

Government policy condemned: The chief executive of the Southern Health Board has accused the government of abandoning asylum-seekers in rural areas after two groups of asylum-seekers were sent to Ballylickey, west Cork, without notification to either the Southern Health Board or Cork County Council.

#### Co. Carlow

While consultation on asylum dispersal to Carlow proceeds on a more rational key than at Rosslare, the Nationalist and Leinster Times warns of increasing discrimination against Angolan and Nigerian refugees by landlords who refuse them accommodation.

Around 150 people attended a public consultation meeting to discuss the proposed purchase by the Office of Public Works of the Ionad Folláin holistic retreat centre in Myshall, a small village in the foothills of Mount Leinster about ten miles from Carlow town. While many openly expressed willingness to support asylum-seekers, the meeting ended with a proposal to meet with the Department of Justice to oppose the purchase. Spokespeople said that 'while they felt for the refugees', theirs was a small isolated village with inadequate medical or educational facilities and that they were not in a position to deal with them.

#### Tramore, Co. Waterford

After the front-page headline of the Waterford News and Star warned that the seaside-resort of Tramore was being 'targeted as a refugee centre', Fianna Fáil politician, Ben Gavin, chair of the Waterford harbour Commissioners, criticised the plan to house asylum-seekers in the middle of a thriving seaside resort arguing that holiday-makers did not want to be 'hassled by 15 people on the prom selling Big Issues'. A puzzled Big Issue editor, Rosemarie Meleady described Gavin's comments as 'totally incomprehensible'.

Tramore Tourism also criticised the plan, adding that it would have no objection to six or seven asylum-seeker families 'being housed properly and integrated in the community'. On 25 April, the Riverstown Committee held a public meeting to discuss government plans to house refugees in two guest houses, Atlantic House and Ocean View. Acting committee chair Paddy Butler said locals were angry that the government had not discussed its plans with them and felt that as asylum-seekers are not allowed to work and they are receiving a small amount in social welfare, they'll end up hanging out on the beach and getting bored and that's when they'll turn to stealing'. However, locals said that if the figure were reduced, the asylum-seekers would be welcomed.

#### Athlone, Midlands

There are some success stories reported from the Midlands where around 80 asylum-seekers have been dispersed to towns like Birr, Tullamore and Longford without problems. However, in Athlone fifteen families from the travelling community at the Black Berry Lane halting site in Athlone staged a protest after proposals were leaked that 100 mobile homes to accommodate 100 refugee families were to be moved into a 15 acre site

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beside their homes. According to a spokesperson Teresa Joyce, the Travellers have nothing against the refugees but were angry at the authorities' double standards as the 15 families have been waiting for 12 years for proper living accommodation to be provided with toilets and running water at the Athlone site. The Harmony Community Development Programme, which speaks for the Travellers, said that it was not opposed to welcoming asylum-seekers but wanted fewer mobiles and more services. Councillor Kieran Molloy, who said the real problem was not a lack of goodwill but the lack of information coming from Dublin, said that mobile homes were not a suitable form of accommodation.

#### Galway

There is fear that opposition to asylum-seekers in Galway is growing although there are encouraging signs of support. Whereas a Galway councillor says that asylum-seekers should be 'screened' for their skills before being allowed to come to the West, the organisers of the annual St. Patrick's Day parade in Galway invited 15 asylum-seekers from Nigeria, the Congo, Russia and several east European countries to participate in a procession, reflecting the multicultural nature of the community.

#### Clogheen, Co. Tipperary

Police are treating a fire which broke out on the 25 April at the Vee Valley Hotel in Clogheen, Co. Tipperary, as suspected arson. The attack on the hotel happened hours before local residents were due to meet with the DASS to voice their objections to a plan to house up to 40 refugees at the hotel.

At the public meeting, attended by 400 people, the chair of the local residents' group, Dick Keating, said that residents of the village were not behind the suspected arson. But angry locals expressed outrage at plans to disperse asylum-seekers to their scenic village. As only 400 people live in Clogheen, locals argued that the village should take no more than ten asylum-seekers. One local woman received huge applause when she demanded to know whether the new arrivals had criminal records, were rapists, paedophiles or murderers and other residents demanded a guarantee from the DASS that the asylum-seekers were not carriers of infectious diseases. A publican predicted violence between asylum-seekers and locals if dispersal went ahead. One man, who has maintained a picket outside the hotel to protest against the asylum-seekers, vowed to continue his picket for 'as long as it takes' and even threatened to form a barricade outside the hotel to prevent the asylum-seekers taking up residence. But now it is unclear whether damage to the hotel is such that dispersal will have to be postponed anyway.

#### Dublin

A residents' association in Ballsbridge has launched a High Court action to prevent a new reception centre for one hundred asylum-seekers being set up in their road.

#### Ballymullen, Tralee, Kerry

At a public meeting, the majority of the 277 residents of Ballymullen, a village a mile from Tralee, voted against a government plan to accommodate 300 asylum-seekers in mobile homes in a former army barracks at the heart of the village. A counter proposal to accept 27 asylum-seekers (equal to ten per cent of the village population) was also rejected by villagers who only gave their assent to the proposal that the village should receive no asylum-seekers at all.

Ballymullen village, which has only recently gained Heritage Town status and has an army tradition dating to the 19th century, has just two shops, two pubs, a post office, a creamery and the former army barracks. When rumours started to circulate that the barracks was to be transformed into an asylum centre, locals were incensed because they had previously been told that the barracks would be developed commercially and that they should receive a share in funds raised.

More on Kerry: There was outrage after the Independent TD for Kerry South, Jackie Healy-Rae, described refugees as 'freeloaders, blackguards and hoodlums'. The leader of the Labour group in the Dail called on the government, which relies on Independent support to maintain power, to disassociate itself from Healy-Rae's 'inflammatory comments' which would be 'music to the ears of those whose only response to their difficult problem is to promote hatred and bigotry'. In a radio interview with RTÉ's Morning Ireland, Healy-Rae implied that the arrival of asylum-seekers to Kerry would lead to greater problems among the homeless and Travellers. To argue that asylum seekers cause homelessness is a 'despicable lie' said the Socialist TD Joe Higgins. Healy-Rae warned of growing resentment in rural areas generally and 'civil rumpus' unless tougher policies on asylum-seekers were implemented immediately. He called for more deportations and screening as the basis upon which he would continue to give support to the government.

#### County Kildare

A demonstration of 300 people, including 70 children carrying placards stating 'Health - are we at risk?' marched in Kildare to oppose a government plan to house up to 400 asylum-seekers at the disused army McGee barracks, which has already housed 300 Kosovo refugees. Adult demonstrators carried placards stating



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'Kildare says No' and 'Your town could be next'. Now the Kildare Chamber of Commerce has launched a legal action to stop the government plan.

Within hours of the demonstration, locals attended a public consultation meeting with the Department of Justice. Local doctor Michael Collins asked, to loud applause, what measures would be put in place to address any possible spread of TB or hepatitis B. Insisting that he was not suggesting that asylum-seekers would spread disease, Collins said that a stretched health service would be bad both for the people of the town and for the asylum-seekers. Other members of the audience asked whether a wall could be built around the site in order to protect local people's privacy and whether extra police and schoolteachers could be employed.

#### Corotin, Burren

In Corotin, a village on the edge of the Burren, Declan Kelleher agreed to chair a consultation meeting only on condition that 'not one prejudicial remark' was passed. In his opening remarks, Kelleher, reminded his audience that in the last century not one person present would have had an ancestor that was not an economic refugee.

#### National Anti-Racism Committee warns of stereotyping

Philip Watt, director of the National Consultative Committee on Racism and Interculturalism, says that a small number of groups were using 'emotive, selective and inaccurate information' which has the 'potential to sustain an atmosphere of hostility towards asylum-seekers'. Such labelling and misinformation leads to the demonisation of asylum-seekers and creates the conditions for racially motivated attacks. The reporting of crime issues is a cause for concern. Despite repeated denials from Garda that asylum seekers are responsible for a crime wave they continue to be labelled as criminals. Superintendent John Farrelly of the Garda press office said that figures published in newspapers alleging Nigerian involvement in crime had not come from the Garda. 'We do not when publishing crime figures links crime to individual groups' said Farrelly. (Irish Times 4, 6,7., 21.2, 24.3., 4,7,8,11,12,13,14,17, 19,21,26,29.4., 2,3,8.5.00, Sunday Business Post 19.3.00, Financial Times 1.5.00, Irish Independent 26.4.00, Irish Examiner 26.4, 2, 4, 5.5.00, RTE website unity@tao.ca)

#### The search for reception facilities

##### Asylum ships considered

Justice minister John O'Donoghue is considering a proposal to house immigrants in floating hostels off the coast while their asylum applications are considered. The Irish Refugee Council and the Irish Council for Civil Liberties immediately opposed the plan to lease, on a two-year contract, six asylum-ships (each accommodating around 200 people) located in ports in Dublin, Waterford, Galway, Limerick and Cork, but towed across ports when needed. Such euphemistically-named 'flotels' would create 'floating ghettos in urban ports' that would further isolate 'an already marginalised people'. The announcement of the proposal led to inflammatory headlines in the Limerick Leader which spoke disparagingly of 'the spectre of flotels looming on the Shannon Estuary' and asked why asylum-seekers could not be sent back to the country from whence they came.

##### Following the European lead

In March, the minister of state for public works, Martin Cullen, announced that he was to travel to Norway to inspect floating hotels there. Officials had already visited five other countries to inspect flotel and pavilion-style accommodation. The Irish Independent investigated conditions at the Embrica Marcel, a converted floating hotel moored behind a dike at a remote location on the river Meuse, 50 miles east of Rotterdam. More than 270 people, representing 30 nationalities, are stuck on board in cramped conditions, without sports or other recreational facilities. (Irish Times 24, 30. 3.00, Irish Independent 28.3.00)

##### Sligo says no

There will be no flotel in Sligo, says Sinn Féin deputy mayor Sean MacManus, also a member of Sligo harbour Board. 'If a ship of cattle were to be moored in Sligo Bay there would quite rightly be protests by animal rights activists'. This proposal is inhumane, MacManus concluded.

##### Will new reception centres be detention centres?

Following the controversy generated by Irish Taoiseach, Bertie Ahern, who, on a visit to Australia described the Australian system of interning asylum-seekers in detention centres as 'the best integrated system in the world', the government has announced that it will not opt for mandatory detention but will introduce a programme of housing asylum-seekers in large reception centres throughout the state.

##### Taoiseach visits Australia

On 13 March, Ahern visited the Migrant Resource Centre in Campsie, Sydney and exchanged views with senator Kay Patterson, a junior minister at the Australian department of immigration and multicultural affairs. Ahern was told that in the early 1990s Australia adopted a policy of mandatory detention of all illegal entrants

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who are taken to six guarded compounds - detention facilities which now hold between 3,600-4,000 people, mostly Iraqis and Afghans. Prefabs and military tents have also been used as the cost of detention shoots up to an estimated \$130 million a year.

#### UNHCR condemns 'Australian model'

But, according to the Examiner, the Australian model of detention has been condemned by the UNHCR which describes mandatory detention as violating the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and the Australian Senate has passed a resolution calling on the government to implement a refugee policy which complies with international norms.

#### Political fall out

The appearance that the Taoiseach gave of favouring such a system was roundly condemned by the Labour opposition and even senior members of Fianna Fáil were quick to distance themselves from his proposal. Tánaiste Mary Harney said that neither she nor her party would favour setting up detention centres. And the Taoiseach's brother, Dublin North West TD, Noel Ahern, declared that detaining asylum-seekers would be against everything that Fianna Fáil stands for.

Ahern was particularly incensed when Fianna Gael leader Bruton attacked him at an EU summit in Lisbon for 'exploiting the immigration issue for political gain'. This, according to Ahern, was 'one of the most cynical statements of the opposition in recent years'.

#### Protest

On 21 March - the International Day Against Racism - protesters demonstrated in Dublin against any attempts to intern asylum-seekers. (Examiner 14,16,21,25.3.00, Irish Times 16.3.00, Sunday Business Post 19.3.00)

#### Deportation violence alleged

While justice minister O'Donoghue has promised to speed up deportations of hundreds of asylum-seekers following a legal amendment, the Anti-Racist Campaign in Ireland is concerned that forced deportations are leading to violence. A Nigerian asylum-seeker, Omoniyi, was allegedly beaten by the Garda at Dublin airport during an unsuccessful attempt to deport him to Belgium. Police say that Omoniyi attempted to assault them during deportation; but campaigners say he was handcuffed throughout. (Irish Times 4.1.00, Correspondence Anti-Racist Campaign Dublin)

#### Health Boards say asylum-seekers are not a public health risk

The Western and Eastern Health Boards have been trying to play down scares that asylum-seekers are a public health risk bringing in infectious diseases such as TB, hepatitis and HIV. At the same time, however, they argue that current screening facilities for asylum-seekers and refugees are under-resourced so that the system for identifying all those with infectious diseases is not working properly.

#### Trades unions call for health screening

The trades unions SIPTU and IMPACT are calling for a debate on the screening of refugees and asylum-seekers for infectious diseases after some staff at the refugee application centre in Dublin tested positive in a screening programme for TB. The tests do not demonstrate that a person has TB, only that they have been exposed to it. Up to 16 per cent of those who tested positive for TB in the Eastern Health Board region in 1998 were non-nationals. (Irish Times 31.1.00)

#### Eastern Health Board - more resources needed

The Eastern Health Board favours an incentive programme to try and get asylum-seekers and refugees to come forward and be screened for infectious diseases. According to vice chairman, Dr. Philip O'Connell, who bemoans the under-resourcing of screening facilities, 'I've no interest in witch-hunting or targeting a particular group but I am interested in identifying people who have a problem.'

#### Western Health Board rebukes scare mongering member

Western Health Board member John Flannery, a Mayo county councillor who has courted controversy in the past, has questioned the board's policy of housing people without screening them for infectious diseases. The Health Board's Chief executive, Dr. Sheelay Ryan rebuffed Flannery's comments that she took as a coded reference to asylum-seekers. Flannery, a member of Fine Gael, was temporarily expelled from the party last year for suggesting that Travellers be tagged to enable the authorities to monitor their movements. (Irish Times 24, 31.1, 8.2.00)

#### Integration package for refugees planned

The government has accepted the recommendations of an inter-departmental group on the integration of refugees and those granted leave to stay on humanitarian or family reunification grounds and approved a pro-

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gramme of training, research and public awareness aimed at promoting integration. A new organisational structure will be set up to facilitate integration and the National Consultative Committee on Racism and Interculturalism may be given a role in developing a strategy to raise public awareness on issues affecting refugees. Research on the specific needs of refugees and on the attitudes of Irish people to them will also be carried out.

#### Fine Gael accepts cultural diversity

Fine Gael's spokesperson on justice, equality and law reform says that Ireland must move towards an acceptance of cultural diversity. Unlike the rest of Europe, where there have been huge movements across national boundaries, Ireland has been insulated from major transnational movements of people. This insularity may explain Irish attitudes today. (Irish Times 11, 24.2.00)

#### New immigration laws will be skills-based

The government has announced that a new skills-based immigration package will include preferential treatment of foreign workers in the technology and construction sectors as well as nurses. In the construction sector, the scheme will be aimed at attracting planners, architects and engineers.

#### Growth economy needs highly-skilled workers

The announcement follows political debate and a report from a Government Task Force on Skills Shortages which called for more immigration. The interdepartmental group has calculated that 200,000 new immigrants will be needed over the next seven years to maintain the growth of the economy as envisaged under the National Development Plan. Most workers are needed in information and communications technology. Based on immigration patterns of recent years, 80 per cent of the 200,000 are expected to be returning Irish or nationals of European Economic Area member-states. But the government is also expected to target highly-skilled immigrants from the US, Canada, South Africa and India. Tánaiste Harney had already proposed that immigration rules should be liberalised to allow a simpler entry process, initially for skilled workers in the information and communications technology area. Fine Gael had called for the State to accept 10,000 immigrants a year from outside the EU. In an immigration policy document, the party suggested that an annual quota, which could be adjusted if economic needs changed, be established and that the current work permit system for asylum-seekers be overhauled.

#### What of low-skilled workers?

While the interdepartmental group recommends a consultation process on the question of immigration of low-skilled workers, the general secretary of the trades union IMPACT has warned the government that trades unions will not support 'dual track' immigration policies that 'welcome the well-educated wizard, but leave the destitute asylum-seeker at the door'. Peter McLoone told IMPACT's biennial equality seminar in Dublin that immigrants must be welcomed into the labour force alongside other marginalised groups like Travellers and the disabled. But Irish chief executives, according to a survey carried out by Prospectus Consultants and Decision magazine, clearly disagree. While bosses want immigration laws relaxed in order to ease the skills shortages in highly-skilled workers in specific sectors, they do not want similar measures introduced for low-skilled workers. (Irish Times 14.1, 28.3, 3, 12.400)

#### Polls suggest public want strict refugee controls

An Irish Times/MBBI opinion poll found that 74 per cent of voters want strict limits placed on the number of refugees allowed into Ireland. Support for harsher controls is greater in Dublin and among older voters. On the other hand, 60 per cent of voters agree that a more generous approach should be taken towards refugees and immigrants in Ireland in view of the Irish history of emigration and its current prosperity. (Irish Times 24.1.00)