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Introduction to Refugees and Asylum Seekers in Israel

Who are the asylum seekers in Israel?

Asylum seekers are defined as people whose lives or freedom are endangered in their country of origin. According to data from the Population, Immigration and Border Authority from August 2012, the number of asylum seekers living in Israel stands at approximately 57,000 people. An estimated 15,210 of these asylum seekers are from Sudan, 35,895 are from Eritrea and 6,000 from other countries. Refugees and asylum seekers do not represent the largest foreign population in Israel. Data indicates that most foreigners in Israel are legal migrant workers (around 75,000) as well as individuals travelling on a tourist visa beyond the date of expiration (around 95,000), 47% of whom are from the former Soviet Union.

What is the legal status of the Eritrean and Sudanese asylum seekers who are currently in Israel but not imprisoned?

Israel groups asylum seekers from Eritrea and Sudan under a policy of "temporary collective protection." By utilizing this policy, the government of Israel acknowledges the danger in these two countries and does not deport asylum seekers to their countries of origin. Asylum seekers are given deferred deportation orders, which render their stay in Israel legal. This documentation, however, does not allow them access to formal work permits, health care or welfare services. Asylum seekers are stuck in a legal limbo; while being allowed to remain in the country, they lack access to basic services in order to survive, advance, and integrate.

What about the government's claim that Eritreans and Sudanese are not refugees?

In Israel, there is no way of knowing for certain who is a refugee and who is not. The Ministry of Interior refuses to individually assess applications for asylum of Sudanese and Eritrean nationals. Accusations that Africans in Israel are "work infiltrators" are baseless and are used to incite negative public opinion. Data from a number of other countries can offer an indication as to the potential status of these individuals. Eritreans and Sudanese, who comprise 90% of this population in Israel, receive relatively high recognition rates as refugees around the world. The rate of refugee status recognition for Eritrean asylum seekers is 88% and for Sudanese 64%. However, the current rate of refugee status recognition in Israel is 0.2%.



Why does this population tend to end up in the neighborhoods of south Tel Aviv?

The concentration of asylum seekers in south Tel Aviv stems from the fact that those released from prison are given a bus ticket to the Tel Aviv Central Bus Station by the Israeli government. Israeli human rights and humanitarian organizations, as well as the cultural center of the refugee communities, are located in Tel Aviv and without public access to basic needs, refugees are likely to remain in this city. The rapid growth of the asylum seeking population in south Tel Aviv, already comprised of marginalized neighborhoods, has become a considerable burden for local residents, adding further distress to the experience of asylum seekers. Human rights groups are calling on the Israeli authorities to invest additional resources in the affected areas.

What about the claim that even if they are all refugees, Israel still cannot absorb them all?

The Refugee Convention does not dictate a refugee quota and international standards forbid the return of people to a place where their lives are in danger. Of course, no country can absorb refugees without limit and in extreme cases countries establish refugee camps together with international aid organizations, the UN and others. In Israel, the number of asylum seekers living in the country is not considered to be extreme. A report published by the Knesset Information Center in August 2012 stated that "the State of Israel is not considered a country in which mixed-migration flows... is especially large, in comparison to the countries of the EU, Kenya, and South Africa. The target population of the UNHCR in Israel is not especially large, and also not in relation to Israel's population." It is important to clarify that human rights groups in Israel, including our organizations, do not oppose all deportations. Rather, the State should respect its responsibility to examine each individual asylum request and should not deport people whose lives or freedom are in danger.

What about the claim that if Israel gives asylum seekers work and rights, it will encourage others to come to Israel?

Asylum seekers arrive in many different countries around the world every day. These individuals are willing to risk their lives in order to flee persecution and the violation of human rights in their country of origin. In the last year alone, 1,500 asylum seekers drowned in the Mediterranean Sea while attempting to reach safety. Despite the risks associated with these journeys through the Sinai or across the Mediterranean, individuals continue to flee war, forced conscription, and serious violation of human rights in order to seek asylum in countries like Israel.