



Refugee Digest 41

May 12th 2020

Displaced Persons in a Time of COVID-19.

37 illegal immigrants escaped from the Lindela repatriation facility near Krugersdorp on 6th May. It is alleged that they escaped while the security detail were on strike protesting against the failure of the Department of Home Affairs to provide personal protective equipment. The Minister, Dr Aaron Motsoaledi, refuted the claim that the facility was not compliant with anti COVID-19 standards. He also confirmed that there had been testing at the facility and that no one had been found positive. The Minister said that the protest by the security guards resulted from a matter between the guards and their employers.

<https://www.sabcnews.com/sabcnews/37-detainees-escape-from-lindela/>

<https://m.news24.com/SouthAfrica/News/37-illegal-immigrants-escape-from-lindela-repatriation-centre-motsoaledi-claims-inside-job-20200506>

On Thursday 7th May 94 Lesotho nationals were deported from Lindela following riots in the facility on the Sunday and Wednesday, after a visit by Dr Motsoaledi.

<https://m.news24.com/SouthAfrica/News/94-lesotho-nationals-deported-from-lindela-repatriation-centre-following-another-riot-20200507>

Some 574 Zimbabweans were also due for deportation at about the same time.

<https://www.thesouthafrican.com/news/africa/where-is-lindela-repatriation-centre-how-many-illegal-immigrants-deported/>

<https://mimicnews.com/lindela-repatriation-centre-nearly-700-immigrants-deported-on-thursday>

On Monday 11th May the Minister of Social Development launched the Social Relief of Distress Grant, which is a R350 grant available for people who have absolutely no other form of income, and who have been adversely affected by the pandemic. The Minister confirmed that it was available to “refugees who are already on DHA’s system and are living within the borders of South Africa.” This excludes asylum seekers including, crucially, those who are not on the system because of the huge administrative backlogs at DHA.

<https://www.polity.org.za/article/r350-covid-19-social-relief-grant-applications-now-open-2020-05-11>

In New York State, Governor Andrew Cuomo declared that there would be no state funding for undocumented immigrants in terms of aid for dealing with COVID-19. This drew criticism from advocacy groups working with displaced persons. There seems to be a growing trend that the most vulnerable group, (undocumented migrants) within an already vulnerable group, is being abandoned in terms of material support. However, in New York City the mayor's office was able to assist undocumented immigrants with support from George Soros to the tune of \$20m.

<https://mailchi.mp/bb467f608637/early-arrival-cuomo-says-no-aid-for-undocumented-immigrants?e=59ce38aeca>

Two policy issues with regard to migration have been under scrutiny in the USA in recent times. The Trump administration has closed further possibilities for the even limited immigration to the USA under the present circumstances, citing the pandemic as its main reason. Some political commentators have said that since President Trump is now unable to use an improved economy as his key claim for re-election, he has to show strong action on immigration; this is an issue of importance to his support base. The policy issue is whether in fact borders can be closed to asylum seekers and refugees who are, for example, fleeing war, violence, gangsterism and similar desperate circumstances. Closures of the border to such categories may well be against international law.

The second policy issue is around the detention of illegal immigrants and the close physical proximity in which such detainees are held, as well as the very limited access they have to health facilities. Advocacy groups are devising criteria which would support the release of such detainees, including having no record of violence and having passed their first set of interviews. Both policies could add significantly to the jurisprudence around immigration emerging during the pandemic.

<https://maryknollogc.org/article/protecting-asylum-seekers-during-covid-19>

<https://justiceforimmigrants.org/news/usccb-mrs-letter-to-dhs-regarding-care-for-detainees-and-uac-in-light-of-covid-19/>

<https://apnews.com/f91815c3b6394f8c67ffad029ced0d56>

In a similar vein, in the UK a number of church leaders and NGOs have appealed to the Prime Minister to allow those with 'insecure immigration status' who have no access to public funds to be given a temporary reprieve, allowing them to stay in the UK and work during the time of the pandemic. Under present policies those with insecure immigration status are denied many public benefits. There have also been several calls for the scrapping of the 'no access to public funds' policy.

<https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2020/may/03/give-refugees-temporary-leave-to-remain-during-covid-19-crisis>

It is worth noting that in ordinary circumstances the British Parliament would have debated the post-Brexit Immigration Bill this week. It is designed to control immigration and to impose a point system on those applying to enter the UK so that only 'the brightest and the best' gain entry. This is done to protect jobs and to ensure that net immigration is under 100 000 per year. Even at the time of writing, it has been observed that fruit on farms risks rotting without the help of immigrant workers during the pandemic. And the pandemic is said to have revealed the 'ambiguities and myths' regarding immigration that have been part of the debate around Brexit.

<https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2020/apr/29/the-guardian-view-on-immigration-and-covid-19-old-myths-are-exposed>

https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/may/11/covid-19-crisis-stokes-european-tensions-over-migrant-labour?CMP=Share_AndroidApp_WhatsApp

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