

Refugee centers favored by Germany's interior minister are a public safety nightmare, police say



German Interior Minister Horst Seehofer and Chancellor Angela Merkel during a news conference in Berlin on Feb. 7, 2018.

KRISZTIAN BOCSI/BLOOMBERG

INGOLSTADT, Germany — Franklin Uweh's home of eight months, ever since he arrived in Germany after fleeing his native Nigeria, is a squat, stucco compound in the verdant Bavarian countryside that he shares with hundreds of other asylum seekers.

He's not allowed to work. He's not allowed to take language classes. His movements are strictly controlled. And every day he wakes up fearing that he'll be deported, the one fate he considers worse than an indefinite stay in this government-run shelter.

"There's no life in this place," said the 27-year-old. "It's like a prison."

But to Germany's top law enforcement official, it's something else: a national model.

That dissonance is at the heart of a debate in Germany about the country's treatment of arrivals who have come seeking refugee protection, but who are unlikely to be allowed to stay.

Germany has a new government this spring, and although many of the players remain the same, perhaps the biggest difference is a much tougher asylum policy in a country that accepted more than 1 million refugees during an unparalleled influx less than three years ago.

The hardened stance reflects a souring national mood, with a far-right party now in Parliament for the first time in more than half a century and Chancellor Angela Merkel under pressure to pull up the welcome mat once and for all.

Merkel has resisted doing so, arguing that the country must fulfill its humanitarian obligations to people fleeing war and persecution. But she has signed off on an upper limit to the overall number of asylum seekers, as well as a cap on family members who can join their relatives in Germany.

And now Horst Seehofer, her new interior minister, is advancing a “master plan” to deal with one of the government’s more vexing refugee-related challenges: how to quickly deport those who don’t win asylum.

Core to his strategy are mass shelters like the one where Uweh lives.

Known as “anchor centers,” they are intended to house migrants who, because they come from countries whose nationals often do not meet German asylum requirements, are deemed to have little chance of securing refugee protection. Residents – most of whom are from Nigeria, Ukraine, Afghanistan or Balkan nations – stay there from the time they arrive in Germany until the day they are deported.

Unlike facilities for likely refugees, which are often small and interspersed throughout cities, towns and villages, the anchor centers are isolated by design. They are located far from German communities and offer virtually no opportunities for residents to integrate.

Seehofer argues that they allow the government to conduct a speedy asylum review, with every step of the process under one roof, and to keep close watch on those deemed ineligible to stay in Germany.

That has been a persistent problem: Last year, about half a million unsuccessful asylum seekers remained in the country, and efforts to reduce their number have fallen short.

About 50,000 people have been deported in the past two years – a fraction of the some 450,000 who have applied for asylum in Germany during the same period. Unlike in the United States, where deportations sharply expanded under presidents Barack Obama and Trump, the German government has struggled to increase its deportation totals. A lack of cooperation from home countries and a bureaucratic process that involves coordination among local, regional and federal authorities are among the reasons why.

The issue became a focus of intense public debate in Germany in December 2016, when a Tunisian man who had been turned down for asylum but who slipped away before he could be deported rammed a stolen truck into a Berlin Christmas market, killing 12.

“When it comes to protecting the citizens, we need a strong state. I will take care of that,” Seehofer recently told the *Bild am Sonntag* in an interview touting his plans.

Yet Seehofer’s goal of making Bavarian anchor centers a model that can be replicated nationwide has run into fierce opposition from refugee advocates and police officials, who argue that the facilities are inadequate and will only breed resentment among residents. That, they say, will ultimately harm, not enhance, public safety.

“If we’re talking about thousands of people living together – people who don’t have any occupation, who may be traumatized, who are alone – it’s clear that there will be tensions,” said Jörg Radek, deputy chairman of the Federal Police Union.

Such tensions recently flared at a facility in the southern German town of Ellwangen, where police attempted to detain a 23-year-old Togolese man who had been marked for deportation.

Nearly 200 fellow asylum seekers blocked the officers’ path, and the police were forced to leave empty-handed. They recaptured the man days later, but it took hundreds of heavily armed officers, with numerous arrests and injuries resulting from a situation that the local police commander described as “very overheated.”

Nothing like that has happened at the center here on the outskirts of Ingolstadt, a picturesque Bavarian city along the Danube River that’s best known as the home of the carmaker Audi.

But the anger among asylum seekers was evident during a media tour of a facility that’s normally off-limits to outsiders.

“I need help!” Alimat Kubi pleaded to reporters during a demonstration by dozens of the facility’s residents, who held aloft handmade signs and chanted slogans protesting the shelter’s conditions.

Kubi said she has spent eight months in a tiny room alongside her husband and four children. None of them can sleep at night because of the cramped quarters. And now they have a baby - her fifth child - born earlier this month. But they are not able to heat up bottles of milk for her, because residents are barred from cooking.

“We thought Germany would be better for us,” Kubi said, shaking her head.

She said she fled her native Nigeria to protect her young daughters from female genital mutilation, a practice that is pervasive in some parts of the country. A dangerous journey across the desert and the sea followed.

Her family is still waiting for word on whether they can stay.

Although the average wait time for a decision among shelter residents is more than four months, some cases can take a year or longer because of appeals and the complicated nature of asylum claims for people who, in many instances, arrived in Germany without passports or other documents.

Most Nigerians who apply for asylum in Germany are rejected on the grounds that they are seeking a better life, not necessarily fleeing war or persecution. But escaping female genital mutilation is a valid reason for granting protection, according to social workers who assist the migrants.

Human rights advocates say policies for deciding who goes to the anchor centers ignore those specific reasons people fled their homes, and focus only on nationality.

And once in the centers, where details of their cases are first considered, residents have virtually no hope of making progress with their German integration.

“There is no contact with neighbors because there are no neighbors,” said Alexander Thal, spokesman for the Bavarian Refugee Council, an advocacy group. “They just have to sit inside the center and wait.”

They also can be cut off from legal assistance. In Ingolstadt, only one lawyer specializes in asylum cases, and his office is miles away.

“People don’t have the tools to make use of their rights,” said Gabriele Störkle, a

social worker with the aid group Caritas, one of the few organizations allowed inside the center.

Facility administrators said they were not surprised by the residents' display of anger during the media tour. But they also defended conditions at a facility that was until recently a military barracks.

"It's not luxury living," said Martin Nell, a spokesman for the regional administration that oversees the center. "But they have food. They have housing. They have humane living conditions."

Uweh, the 27-year-old Nigerian, strongly disagrees. He described the food as inedible, legal advice as scarce and privacy as nonexistent.

But the worst part is psychological. After eight months at the center, he wakes up each day to find that friends have been deported. His asylum claim has been rejected and he knows that one day soon, the police will come for him.

"There's no hope," he said, his lip quivering. "They should have just told me when I got to Germany, 'We don't need you here. Go back.' "

Source: <https://www.stripes.com/news/europe/refugee-centers-favored-by-germany-s-interior-minister-are-a-public-safety-nightmare-police-say-1.527994>

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