

Number of asylum-seekers leaving Israel rises tenfold in two months

Gideon Sa'ar, touring Holot 'open lodging facility,' claims success against 'infiltrators.'

By Ilan Lior | Jan. 30, 2014 | 12:54 AM

The number of African asylum seekers leaving Israel more than doubled this month compared to last month, and totaled over 10 times the number of emigres in the month before that, Interior Minister Gideon Sa'ar announced Wednesday.

With two days left in January, 773 Africans have left the country this month, up from 325 in December and 63 in November. According to the Population, Immigration and Border Authority, as of late September there were 53,636 African asylum-seekers in Israel. Throughout all of last year, 2,612 Africans left the country.

Last month, immigration inspectors began arresting and imprisoning asylum-seekers who had not renewed their temporary residence permits in time. The office hours at the Interior Ministry during which asylum seekers can renew their permits were reduced at the same time. The state also increased the amount of the grant given to people who agree to leave the country from \$1,500 to \$3,500. The interior minister's announcement stated that the larger grant was being provided as a temporary measure that would last until the end of March 2014.

"The obvious trend is the dramatic increase in the number of infiltrators leaving Israel," the interior minister said after a tour of the Holot detention facility in the Negev, where asylum-seekers are being sent. "This trend is the result of our clear policy and the combination of ways that we have carried it out: a new law for the prevention of infiltration, the establishment of an open lodging facility and the start of summonses to it from downtown urban areas, and the monetary grant for those who leave voluntarily. We will continue to move forward on the goals we have set: encouraging voluntary departure from Israel and reducing the number of infiltrators in the cities."

Officials of human-rights groups say that there is almost no difference between the Holot facility, which the state describes as an "open lodging facility," and a prison. Since Holot opened, residents have complained about the severe cold of the rooms at night, the lack of warm clothing, insufficient health services and a shortage of food. On Wednesday, a fight broke out between asylum-seekers and guards following inmates' complaints that they had not been given food until the afternoon. One guard was wounded and required medical treatment, and three asylum-seekers were arrested.

Israel has not been deporting the Sudanese and Eritrean nationals because of the danger in their countries of origin, in line with the position of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees. Over the past several months the state has increased the pressure on the

asylum-seekers to leave. Officials of human rights groups say the government's actions violate international law and the Refugee Convention, to which Israel is a signatory. These NGOs accuse Israel of putting illegal pressure on asylum-seekers to return to their countries of origin despite the danger that could be in store for them.

For the second time since summonses to the Holot facility began, buses left for Holot from Tel Aviv. Dozens of asylum-seekers from Sudan and Eritrea reported to the parking lot of Heichal Hasport at the Yad Eliyahu stadium in Tel Aviv with suitcases containing all their possessions. A few of them expressed their frustration to Haaretz over being sent to Holot, saying they had been forced to leave their workplaces, apartments and friends. They said they could not return to their countries of origin, so they had no choice but to report to Holot.

Once the asylum-seekers reach Holot, which is surrounded by fences, they are forbidden to work, and must stand for a head-count every day in the morning, at noon and in the evening. Between 6 A.M. and 10 P.M., they must be inside the facility, and they may not leave or enter. The state promised to provide a place to sleep as well as food, health and social services at the facility. Every one of the inhabitants is given NIS 160 for pocket money every ten days. Some of them are permitted to work inside the facility for fairly low pay.

A group of human-rights activists demonstrated in front of the immigration officers. "This is the time to disobey orders," they shouted as they held signs reading: "Holot is a prison."

MK Miri Regev, chairwoman of the Knesset's Internal Affairs and Environment Committee, responded to the release of the Interior Ministry's statistics by saying, "The statistics of the Administration of Border Crossings, Population and Immigration, which state that more than 750 infiltrators left Israel, are the direct result of intensive legislation and activity of the Interior Ministry and Interior Minister Gideon Sa'ar. I believe that the trend toward reducing the number of infiltrators will continue, and all those involved in the world should be congratulated for it. The statistics are a decisive answer to all the nay-sayers who had doubts about the government's and the Knesset's work regarding the infiltrators."

A month and a half ago, the Knesset approved a new amendment to the Prevention of Infiltration Law, by which African asylum-seekers may be required to live in Holot. Right after the law was approved, the state moved 483 asylum-seekers there; previously, they had been imprisoned in Saharonim in the Negev for a long time. This month, the Population, Immigration and Border Authority ordered about 2,000 asylum-seekers living in the cities to report to Holot within 30 days or face imprisonment, as the law allows.

Most of the people boarding the buses to Holot on Wednesday knew almost nothing about what was in store for them there. "I don't know anything about Holot," said Abd el-Rahman, 32, from Sudan, who has been living in Israel for three years. "It's difficult for us, very difficult. I don't want to go back to Sudan; I have nothing there. I don't want to stay here either; it's difficult for me. If they take me somewhere else, that's fine, but not to Sudan. I didn't come here to work. I have problems there; how can we go back? They'll put us in Holot and we'll see what happens."

A woman sobbed near the bus. She had been separated from her husband, who had been summoned to Holot. Assan, 25, of Sudan, who has been in Israel for three years, had to separate from his girlfriend, who went to the bus with him. "It's very bad," he said. "My family is suffering terribly in a camp in Darfur. I won't tell them about Holot. I hope that they'll give me a chance to study there. We have a lot of problems in our country. We didn't come here for good. There's a war there. When there's peace, I'll go

back to my country. If the problem in Sudan isn't resolved, maybe I'll stay in Holot forever."

Several asylum-seekers tried to delay or cancel their summonses to Holot. Idan Cohen, head of enforcement at the Population, Immigration and Border Authority for the Tel Aviv district, stood in the small tent that had been set up in the parking lot and examined their requests. He granted some of them a postponement of several days. He also agreed to re-examine the case of a married man who had been summoned to Holot despite the authority's promise that it would not call in heads of households. But nobody gave new residence permits to the people who had received postponements, and they expressed their fear that if they were asked to show documentation over the next few days, they would be arrested and imprisoned.