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The mountain of asylum applications is growing all the time

Switzerland is feeling the impact of the turmoil caused by civil war in Africa and the flipside of the "Arab Spring". The influx of refugees has been very high for months, inflaming the political debate.

By Marc Lettau

The Federal Office for Migration announces new, high figures month after month. Behind these figures are people seeking asylum in Switzerland. The highest number of asylum seekers for ten years arrived in Switzerland in January 2012 – over 2,600 asylum applications were made. The most applications by some distance were made by people from Eritrea, a country ravaged by civil war. Many of them have a chance of being recognised as refugees. The second highest number of applications came from Roma people in Serbia. The likelihood that they will be allowed to remain in Switzerland is practically zero. The prospects of the many young Tunisians seeking asylum, who have left their homeland in search of a better future, seem equally hopeless. The losers in the democratic upheaval in Northern Africa, who are without employment or prospects, are also not regarded as being persecuted or in danger.

Four months rather than four years

This influx of refugees presents a challenge for Switzerland because its asylum system is stretched even without record numbers due to the fact that it is undergoing radical change. The authorities are currently looking at ways of streamlining the unsatisfactorily long asylum process. The verification procedure to determine whether an asylum seeker is to be recognised as a refugee and may stay in Switzerland takes around four years on average. Such long waiting times cause additional misery. For migrants with children of school age, being told they must leave the country after years of waiting means uprooting again. Justice Minister Simonetta Sommaruga (SP) would therefore like to see a procedure that lasts no longer than four months. At the same time, she wants to improve legal protection for asylum seekers. The Swiss People's Party (SVP), in particular, has shown a lack of understanding for this policy and has tackled the issue by proposing numerous measures to tighten asylum law.

Whether asylum applications should in future only be received in Switzerland and not

at Swiss embassies abroad is also being debated. This would result in fewer applications. However, such a step would particularly affect those in seriously threatening situations. The Social Democrats (SP) argue that embassy applications could help stem trafficking in illegal immigrants with the initial sorting of applications being carried out locally. The debate over embassy applications also covers the controversial issue of coming to terms with the past. It only became public last year that thousands of embassy applications from Iraqi citizens were deliberately shelved under Justice Minister Christoph Blocher in contravention of the applicable law.

Who wants asylum seekers?

The influx of asylum seekers causes tension in everyday life as well as in politics. The search for accommodation for asylum seekers is becoming increasingly difficult. The debates over specific refugee centre projects have seen a clash between Switzerland's humanitarian tradition and

a widespread, underlying fear of foreigners. A mixed picture is emerging. Some commune presidents are collectively making the case for a joint refugee centre to relieve hardship, as in Ebnet-Kappel in St. Gallen. In other places, such as Bettwil in the canton of Aargau, communes are opposing all plans for such accommodation with rhetoric shaped by anxiety about foreigners.

The fact that various developments are overlapping is also inflaming the debate. Legal immigration from the European Union, in particular from the eastern EU states, currently stands at a high level. Though, of course, there is no correlation between immigration resulting from the free movement of persons (2011: 75,000 immigrants) and the influx of asylum seekers (2011: 22,500 applications). Asylum policy and development aid are also increasingly interlinked. Conservative parties are calling for countries that do not take back their economic refugees to be punished with the withdrawal of development aid. Admittedly, Justice Minister Sommaruga is willing to negotiate with states that receive aid from Switzerland about the readmission of rejected asylum seekers. In principle, however, the Federal Councillor rejects "general, strict and negative conditionality", as the Federal Department of Foreign Affairs (FDFA) maintains when asked. The call for development aid to be made dependent across the board on the willingness of the country concerned to cooperate on migration policy is "generally counterproductive" and mainly affects "the suffering population and not the uncooperative governments". Nina Schneider, a development aid specialist with the organisation Alliance-Sud, also takes the same view. She explains: "The chances are high that cuts in response to transgressions in asylum policy will affect precisely those poverty-alleviation programmes that help to relieve migratory pressure."



In a refugee centre

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