

Wellcome speech by Anne Nielsen, Chairman, SOS Against Racism, Denmark

As chairman for one of the six organisations that sent you an appeal two years ago, I should like to express a wholeheartedly welcome to all the members of the LIBE delegation to Denmark. Thank you for coming! Wellcome also to NGO's, and experts and to the two asylum seekers tonight!

In 2006 we thought: The Danish government does not listen to us, but may be it will listen to the European Union. We are fully aware that with few exceptions we do not share asylum regulatives of the EU. But we hope that the LIBE will not let it unmentioned, when LIBE finds Denmark neglects basic human rights for asylum seekers. We think that human rights are central in the European Union, not least the European Convention of Human Rights, and the UN Convention of Refugees.

Human rights may be seen as some basic rules that fulfill essential needs for human beings, and that regulate relations between society and all kinds of people, dignifying human beings. Non-discrimination is an essential part of every human rights convention. Respect for human rights may be compared with a lighthed candle in a mine, if there is no oxygene the flame will die out. Where human rights are not respected for people of all kinds, there is a place for suffering, conflicts, unrest - and maybe war, the human society dies out and is replaced by an inhuman society.

We wish that even if you have not much time here, you will get a thorough impression of the asylum system in Denmark. We think, you will learn from your visit, that even if the asylum centres are lead by a humanitarian organisation, Red Cross, Denmark, the asylum system is not a humanitarian system, but a system that breakes down human health and dignity.

The break down is fortified by inhuman pressures laid upon rejected asylum seekers who cannot be forcibly repatriated because of war and persecution in their country. These pressures are intended to make them sign a contract that they will leave voluntarily. These "motivational incentives" are continued, even if the politicians and the police and other administration know that they do not work: rejected asylum seekers dare not return to the country they fled from because of war, ethnic cleansing or persecution. And to what should they go back after 8 years in asylum centres in Denmark?

We know that housing standards in Centre Sandholm and Center Kongelunden are probably better than in Malta or the Canarian Islands, and some other asylum centres in Europe. Our biggest problem in Denmark is that asylum seekers spend many years in Danish asylum centres, without elementary human rights and without knowing, where their future will be. Some have been here more than 10 years, and in many different centres.

They are marginalised from most other aspects of life than eating and sleeping. "We eat and we sleep like animals"- one of the asylum seekers said in a film from Centre Avnstrup: Black at heart. But even eating and sleeping is not easy in an asylum centre with many stressed people, with poor facilities, and sometimes being in the middle of a battlemark, since Sandholm is often disturbed by military exercises next to it, and Kongelunden by planes to Kastrup Airport.

Adult asylum seekers are not allowed to take any paid work, and they are badly punished if they work illegally. This situation is stupid, since at the moment we need more labour and have very little unemployment, and we import lots of skilled and unskilled workers from Poland, Litauia, and Sweden. Educated people in the centres cannot use their professional skills and their professional knowledge and skills may get outdated with time.

Many children have poor academic skills, even if their parents are well educated, because the education they get in the centre schools does not meet normal standards. This is worsened by the stresses of the children and by children being moved around from centre to centre, beginning in new classes, new schools, learning new teachers to know, using new school books. Some children have lived in more than 10 different centres. Many parents become mentally ill and depressed and lose their abilities to parent their children, sometimes the child must become a parent for them. We know from a survey that a third of the children have severe problems and need help from a child psychiatrist or psychologist, but will not get that help.

The asylum system is not just. The refugee board is compared to a court by the government, but it does not fulfill the common juridical standards for a court. Often there will be a lack of information, and the asylum seeker will have very limited chances to present his case plausibly. There is no principle of neutrality, of openness, no lay persons are heard, and seldom use of witnesses.

Before we sent the appeal in July 2006 - and of course also after this - we have sent appeals, asked people to sign petitions, in individual cases, in collective cases, we have contacted politicians and journalists, made manifestations and public meetings. We have sent press releases, written columns and notes and letters to the editors. Books have been written, so has documentary films and a theatre play: Sandholm.

There has been exhibitions of fotos and letters by children from the asylum centres. Some asylum seekers have made hunger strikes. At the elections for parliament in November, asylum seekers' children's situation was a big issue, but the elections did not result in any major changes.

The government together with its supporting nationalist party: Danish Peoples Party think, that in order to avoid spontaneous asylum seekers coming to Denmark, we must treat these people as bad as possible. Asylum seekers have become hostages for our xenophobic policy. I hope that everyone of you will agree that it is inhuman to hold people in asylum centres in a constant stress, punished with motivational incentives, and without basic human rights for 6, 8 or 10 years.

And the number of asylum seekers each year is for the government and its supporting party one of the most important results: the fewer the better. In 2002 there were 6000 asylum seekers, in 2007 only about 1000 new asylum seekers came to Denmark, or 650 aside from the interpreters who helped the Danish army in Iraq. Participating in the attack and occupation of Iraq, we are co-responsible for creation of the catastrophe with 4 billion refugees from Iraq.

During World War 2, many Germans did not know how bad the situation was in the concentration camps. The same we cannot say about the Danish government, nor the Danish people. They know that the way people are treated make them suffer, make them mentally ill, kills hope in their lives. We must stop this maltreatment now, and give asylum seekers a decent and secure life now in Denmark, at least those who have spent years here.