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Denmark Plans to Isolate Unwanted Migrants on a Small Island

By Martin Selsoe Sorensen

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COPENHAGEN — Denmark plans to house the country’s most unwelcome foreigners in a most unwelcoming place: a tiny, hard-to-reach island that now holds the laboratories, stables and crematory of a center for researching contagious animal diseases.

As if to make the message clearer, one of the two ferries that serve the island is called the Virus.

“They are unwanted in Denmark, and they will feel that,” the immigration minister, Inger Stojberg, wrote on Facebook.

On Friday, the center-right government and the right-wing Danish People’s Party announced an agreement to house as many as 100 people on Lindholm Island — foreigners who have been convicted of crimes but who cannot be returned to their home countries. Many would be rejected asylum seekers.

The 17-acre island, in an inlet of the Baltic Sea, lies about two miles from the nearest shore, and ferry service is infrequent. Foreigners will be required to report at the island center daily, and face imprisonment if they do not.

“We’re going to minimize the number of ferry departures as much as at all possible,” Martin Henriksen, a spokesman for the Danish People’s Party on immigration, told TV 2. “We’re going to make it as cumbersome and expensive as possible.”

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The deal allocates about \$115 million over four years for immigrant facilities on the island, which are scheduled to open in 2021.

The finance minister, Kristian Jensen, who led the negotiations, said the island was not a prison, but added that anyone placed there would have to sleep there.

Louise Holck, deputy executive director of The Danish Institute for Human Rights, said her organization would watch the situation “very closely” for possible violations of Denmark’s international obligations.

The agreement was reached as part of the annual budget negotiations. Each year, the Danish People's Party demands restrictions on immigrants or refugees in return for its votes on a budget.

In Denmark, as in much of Europe, the surge in migration from the Middle East and Africa in 2015 and 2016 prompted a populist, nativist backlash.

The government has vowed to push immigration law to the limits of international conventions on human rights.

Legal experts said it was too early to tell whether the Lindholm Island project would cross those boundaries, constituting illegal confinement. They said it resembled an Italian government project that was struck down in 1980 by the European Court of Human Rights.

The Lindholm Island plan furthers the government's policy of motivating failed asylum seekers to leave the country by making their lives intolerable.

Asylum seekers with criminal records are not allowed to work in Denmark. Rejected asylum seekers who cannot be deported are given accommodations — where they cannot prepare their own meals — food and an allowance of about \$1.20 per day, which is withheld if they fail to cooperate with the authorities.

A former immigration minister, Birthe Rønn Hornbech, called the island project “a joke” and a blunder comparable to a soccer player scoring a goal for the opposing team.

“Nothing will become of this proposal,” she wrote in her newspaper column.

Many foreigners who have been denied asylum cannot be deported to their home countries for fear of abuse or persecution, or simply because those countries refuse to take them back.

Hundreds lingering in two deportation centers refuse to leave — a challenge for a government that has promised to get rid of those who have no legal right to remain in Denmark.

Some have held out for more than a decade despite a steady deterioration in living conditions. An independent study by a former prison director now working for the rights group Helsinki Citizens' Assembly found conditions in one of the deportation centers to be comparable to those in some prisons, or worse.

Prime Minister Lars Løkke Rasmussen said last month that the government's aim in receiving refugees would no longer be to integrate them, but to host them until they can return to their countries of origin.

“It's not easy to ask families to go home, if they've actually settled,” he told a meeting of his party. “But it is the morally right thing. We should not make refugees immigrants.”

This summer, a ban on face coverings was introduced and quickly nicknamed “the burqa ban” as it followed a debate on the Islamic garment seen by some as “un-Danish.” This month, Parliament is expected to pass legislation requiring immigrants who want to obtain citizenship to shake hands with officials as part of the naturalization ceremony — though some Muslims insist that they cannot shake hands with someone of the opposite sex.

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The government contends that hand shakes are “a basic Danish value.”

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