

Dutch House Votes to Expel Many Denied Political Shelter

The New York Times

February 18, 2004 Wednesday, Late Edition - Final

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Section: Section A; Column 4; Foreign Desk; Pg. 3

Length: 634 words

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Dateline: THE HAGUE, Feb. 17

Body

The **Dutch** lower **house** of Parliament **voted** on Tuesday to **expel** up to 26,000 failed asylum-seekers over the next three years, a move that could give this country one of Europe's most restrictive policies.

The plan, which now goes to the upper **house**, where it is expected to pass, underscores the growing anti-immigrant feeling in a country that has long been proud of its open, liberal society.

The 83-to-57 **vote** came after the center-right coalition government rejected demands by opposition parties for greater lenience.

Immigration Minister Rita Verdonk argued that the plan approved Tuesday was humane because it would not break up families, would provide airline tickets and money to returnees, and would still grant amnesty to about 2,300 people facing severe difficulties.

But in recent days, church and human rights groups have held street protests, calling the plan cruel because **many** of those on the deportation list have lived here for five years or more and had children while awaiting residence papers. Refugee groups have called for hunger strikes and some churches and families have said they will **shelter** people facing expulsion.

The bill applies to people who arrived in the Netherlands before April 2001. The largest numbers are from the former Yugoslavia, Iraq and Afghanistan.

Proponents say that **many** of those people can now safely return home, that not all are **political** refugees, and include "benefit shoppers." But critics disagree, including the New York-based Human Rights Watch, which said in a letter to the immigration minister that "sending people back to places where they could be in danger not only jeopardized their safety, but also was illegal."

Close to 700 people on the deportation list are under investigation for war crimes. The government created a special unit to investigate war crimes suspects among asylum-seekers after fellow refugees implicated them. But a spokesman at the Justice Ministry said investigations had made little headway because cooperation from the countries of origin and the search for witnesses willing to testify had been difficult.

The deportation plan appears harsher than asylum policies elsewhere in Western Europe, where countries including Austria, Britain, Denmark, Germany and Sweden have recently tightened the rules.

In the Netherlands, the move has not come as a surprise. This is already Europe's most densely populated country, and large flows of immigrants over the last 25 years have brought such rapid demographic change that, the

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government predicts, the major **Dutch** cities will have Muslim majorities by 2010. Half the population of Rotterdam is already of foreign descent.

Furthermore, the Netherlands, like much of Western Europe, is experiencing economic stagnation, rising unemployment and severe government budget cuts that have curbed welfare benefits, compounding the resistance to immigrants.

Since 2002, the **Dutch** have **voted** in two elections for parties pledging to slow down immigration. The depth of anti-immigrant feelings became a subject for public debate two years ago when the populist right-wing leader Pim Fortuyn said the Netherlands was "full up."

Mr. Fortuyn said the influx of conservative Muslim clerics, attending to Muslims who are now close to 6 percent of the population, threatened to undermine **Dutch** values like equal rights for women and gays.

Mr. Fortuyn's proposals were milder than the current plan because he argued that asylum-seekers and immigrants already here should be allowed to stay, but that new immigration should stop until those present were better integrated.

Mr. Fortuyn was shot dead in May 2002, but by then he had turned issues like immigrants and asylum-seekers from a taboo subject into one that is now near the top of the agenda of most mainstream **Dutch** parties.

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Classification

Language: ENGLISH

Publication-Type: Newspaper

Subject: PROTESTS & DEMONSTRATIONS (90%); IMMIGRATION (90%); REFUGEES (90%); **POLITICAL** ASYLUM (90%); DEPORTATION (89%); HUMAN RIGHTS (89%); LEGISLATIVE BODIES (89%); HUMAN RIGHTS ORGANIZATIONS (89%); IMMIGRATION LAW (89%); FAMILY (88%); INVESTIGATIONS (88%); CRIMINAL INVESTIGATIONS (85%); ELECTIONS (78%); GOVERNMENT BUDGETS (78%); AMNESTY (78%); HUMAN RIGHTS VIOLATIONS (78%); POLITICS (78%); JUSTICE DEPARTMENTS (75%); CHILDREN (74%); WAR CRIMES (73%); RELIGION (73%); TYPES OF GOVERNMENT (73%); DEMOGRAPHIC GROUPS (72%); LIBERALISM (72%); WELFARE BENEFITS (69%); WITNESSES (67%); MUSLIMS & ISLAM (65%); POPULATION DENSITY (63%); UNEMPLOYMENT RATES (60%)

Organization: HUMAN RIGHTS WATCH (54%)

Industry: GOVERNMENT BUDGETS (78%); BUDGETS (76%); BUDGET CUTS (60%); TRAVEL TICKETS (54%)

Person: Marlise Simons

Geographic: ROTTERDAM, NETHERLANDS (79%); NEW YORK, USA (79%); NETHERLANDS (94%); EUROPE (94%); WESTERN EUROPE (92%); DENMARK (79%); SWEDEN (79%); AUSTRIA (79%); IRAQ (79%); AFGHANISTAN (79%); GERMANY (79%); Netherlands; Yugoslavia; Iraq; Afghanistan; Netherlands

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Load-Date: February 18, 2004

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