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Scotland

Glasgow killing raises major questions about treatment of asylum seekers

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In a major event in Scotland, one person was killed by armed police in a Glasgow hotel used to accommodate asylum seekers. The call 'not to politicise' the incident from SNP and Labour politicians is completely misplaced.

As the dramatic events unfolded on the afternoon of Friday 26 June, the BBC first reported that three people had been killed in a knife stabbing incident. This turned out to be untrue: six people including a police officer were seriously injured and hospitalised, while the apparent perpetrator was shot in a rapid and large armed police response in Glasgow city centre.

Interviews with eye-witnesses seemed to indicate that while all the 100 residents of the hotel were asylum seekers, there were also hotel staff on duty who may have been victims. Motivation for the knife attack and details of the victims other than the police officer are not yet confirmed at the time of writing, though Sky News is reporting that the perpetrator was an asylum seeker about whom mental health concerns had already been reported. [1]

But while everyone will wish the victims a speedy recovery, the events raise important political questions about the use of the hotel and the treatment of asylum seekers by the UK government and its private contractors.

Glasgow's Hotel Asylum Seekers

The incident happened at the Park Inn Hotel, one of six in Glasgow used by a large outsourcing private company, the Mears Group plc, on behalf of the UK government Home Office. Mears agreed a ten-year long contract with the UK Home Office in 2019 worth over one billion pounds to provide accommodation for asylum seekers.

At the beginning of the UK's lockdown, the Mears Group had relocated nearly 400 Glasgow asylum seekers who had been living in the city as part of a longstanding Home Office 'dispersal' policy. This policy dates back 20 years to the Blair Labour government and moves asylum seekers who usually arrive in south east England to other locations across the UK, such as Glasgow, described by a Tory minister in 2015 as "areas where there is a greater supply of suitable and cheaper accommodation".

With only a few minutes' notice to pack their belongings, the hundreds of asylum seekers living in a wide range of properties across Glasgow were rounded up in April and moved into six major city hotels empty during the lockdown. Positive Action in Housing (PAiH) [2], a Glasgow-based charity working to support asylum seekers, raised concerns in May with both the UK Home Office and the Scottish Government [3] over the treatment of the asylum seekers by the Mears Group.

They particularly highlighted that relocating hundreds of people in vans carrying three or four people at a time appeared to breach completely the Scottish Government's then imposition of a total lockdown and the strong message to "Stay Home"; that people should only move if absolutely essential for medical or other reasons. PAiH argue that it was completely unnecessary to move the asylum seekers. The previous landlords accommodating the asylum seekers were simply told that they would no longer be paid in circumstances in which it was clearly almost impossible for them to get new tenants.

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PAiH Director, Robina Qureshi, raised numerous complaints about the treatment of asylum seekers in the hotels including the lack of social distancing during meal times, the inability to open windows, the danger of air conditioning circulating the Coronavirus and other infections, and particularly the withdrawal of the weekly payment of £35.50 - meaning that residents were unable to purchase , toiletries, fruit and other necessities. Including mobile phone credit to stay in touch with family and representatives

The situation escalated when a Syrian asylum seeker, 30 year old Adnan Olbeh, was tragically found dead in one of the hotels prompting local press coverage.

Robina Qureshi explained the treatment of the Glasgow Hotel asylum seekers to the public:

“The “hotel asylum seekers” are very isolated. It’s true they are treated as less than human, a number, one of many. Many people, men and women are suffering from severe mental health conditions.”

and in a letter to the First Minister she went on to say

“Levels of depression are increasing. Many people are survivors of trauma and torture and suffering mental health problems because of the length of time they have been in the asylum system. People are growing increasingly desperate.”

PAiH were also concerned about the welfare of hotel workers and transmission of the virus:

“Hotel employees may also be subjected to an increased viral load in the workplace and then must go back out into the general community for a variety of essential purposes.”

By Wednesday 17 June, so desperate was the situation that a demonstration was called to protest about the conditions of Glasgow Hotel asylum seekers in nearby George Square, outside the Glasgow City Chambers, offices of the SNP-led Glasgow City Council. However, that demonstration also coincided with a gathering of far-right “loyalist” activists who claimed to be “defending statues” in the Square and opposing the Black Lives Matter movement.

The far-right attacked the asylum seeker protest demonstration in scenes the First Minister described as “appalling”. The police largely stood by, though eventually arresting around six people believed to be far-right thugs. But the Scottish Police Federation issued an awful statement saying that both sides were to blame and that the police were caught in the middle between “statue attackers” and “statue defenders”. An emergency demonstration was called in George Square on Saturday 20th June to protest the attack on the asylum seekers demonstration, but SNP politicians called on people to stay away [\[4\]](#)

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Susan Aitken, SNP and leader of Glasgow City Council

SNP calls “not to politicise” wrong

In response to the killing and stabbing incidents SNP politicians such as Susan Aitken, leader of Glasgow City Council, told the BBC:

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“I would absolutely urge anyone not to politicise this, not to use this to divide the city.”

While Aitken obviously has genuine concerns about the far-right mobilising on Glasgow streets, this is the completely wrong approach, but one shared with the Scottish Labour Party whose spokespersons issued similar responses.

Important political questions need to be asked now about the UK Government/Home Office of Priti Patel and Mears Group policy of relocating the Glasgow asylum seekers to empty hotels during the middle of a pandemic. This also means questioning why the SNP at Holyrood and Glasgow City Council apparently did nothing about the “powder keg” situation.

Even a retired former senior police officer told Sky News in an interview on the morning after the incident that “we have got to question” the putting of hundreds of asylum seekers from stressed backgrounds, “packed” into such an environment. Robina Qureshi of PAiH highlighted in a radio interview for the BBC that there were no proper risk assessment procedures for the asylum seekers and that it was the “cheap” accommodation that was the motivation, not their welfare.

The UK’ Government’s privatisation of accommodation for asylum seekers through organisations like the Mears Group also needs to be challenged. Its predecessor in Glasgow, SERCO, also attracted massive criticism and then they moved on to a lucrative contract for the UK government’s currently privatised and failing contract-tracing service for coronavirus. While Mears claims to be a “social” landlord and outsourcing organisation, it is also a public limited company, trading shares on the stock market and making a profit for its shareholders. One of the directors of Mears is a former Chief Operating Officer of the massive profit-making insurance concern, Lloyds Register, and a leading light in the privatised water industry in England. Such people do not have the interests of asylum seekers at heart, only the pursuit of profit. As the official opposition in the Westminster UK Parliament, the Labour Party have an important responsibility to challenge the Tory government on the issue of private firms running public services.

Rather than calling for the situation not to be “politicised”, SNP and Labour politicians should be looking to face down the far right actions by mobilising public demonstrations of support for asylum seekers, seriously challenge the Tory UK government’s “hostile environment” over immigration, and question the role of private companies in running public services for profit rather than public good.

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[1] <https://news.sky.com/story/glasgow-stabbings-warning-over-suspects-mental-state-before-knife-rampage-12015788>

[2] Positive Action in Housing [PAiH] <http://www.paih.org/> “is an independent, anti-racist homelessness and human rights charity (SC027577) dedicated to supporting women, children and men from refugee and migrant backgrounds to rebuild their lives. We believe in a society where everyone has the right to live safe and dignified lives, free from poverty, homelessness or inequality.” (PAiH website). In May 2020 it issued three

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important statements detailing the Glasgow Hotel Asylum Seekers issues: a) Letter to the UK Home Secretary Priti Patel, 11th May 2020:

<https://www.paih.org/letter-to-the-home-secretary-about-the-death-of-syrian-refugee-adnan-olbeh-in-glasgow/>

b) Letter to the Scottish First Minister, 13th May 2020 <https://www.paih.org/letter-to-the-first-minister-about-glasgows-hotel-asylum-seekers/>

c) Protest statement about press coverage of the death of a Glasgow Hotel Asylum Seeker 11th May 2020

<https://www.paih.org/statement-about-mr-adnan-olbeh-syrian-refugee-who-died-in-glasgow/>

[3] Under the UK's complex devolution arrangements, the UK Government of the Conservative Party, Prime Minister Boris Johnson and Home Secretary Priti Patel are responsible for immigration and borders policy/control including asylum seekers, while the Scottish Government of First Minister Nicola Sturgeon of the social democratic/nationalist Scottish National Party (SNP) are responsible for policing, housing, health and other local services and has overseen dealing with the pandemic and lockdown. The two governments disagree about policies on a wide range of issues including immigration and asylum but have generally tried to minimise such differences during the pandemic crisis.

[4] See: <https://socialistresistance.org/glasgow-anti-racists-defiant-against-far-right-attacks/20250>