



Israelis on the Left and Right Balk at Plans to Deport African Migrants

Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu faced an angry backlash from his own ministers when he announced that about half of the 40,000 African asylum seekers who now are in Israel are to be sent to Western countries – like Canada, Germany, and Italy– and the other half could stay in Israel, scrapping original plans to send them all to nations in Africa. Most of the refugees are from Eritrea and Sudan. Israel gave them the choice of being jailed indefinitely or voluntarily relocating to Uganda or Rwanda with \$3,500 spending money. This proposal was opposed by 25,000 Israeli protesters and human-rights activists, because many asylum seekers said they would choose prison rather than go back to Africa. Israeli officials now are worried about the logistical challenges of jailing such a large population. -GEG

Benjamin Netanyahu, the Israeli prime minister, announced yesterday he had reached a deal with the UN to resettle thousands of African asylum seekers only to u-turn within hours after a rebellion by his own ministers.

The Israeli leader said on Monday afternoon that he had struck an international agreement under which around half of the 40,000 asylum seekers in Israel would be sent to Western countries like Canada, Germany and Italy.

Under the terms of the deal, the Israeli government agreed to

let the other half stay in the country and [to scrap controversial plans to deport them to other nations in Africa](#).

But just hours after Mr Netanyahu announced the deal with great fanfare, calling it an “unprecedented common understanding” with the UN, he was forced to retreat in the face of angry backlash.

Several senior ministers denounced the agreement and Right-wing activists from within his political base said it was too generous to the asylum seekers who would be allowed to stay. “For the time being, I am suspending the agreement,” Mr Netanyahu said shortly before midnight.

Most of the asylum seekers in Israel are from Eritrea, an authoritarian east African state where men are often conscripted into the military for life, while a smaller number are from Sudan, including the war-torn Darfur region.

The deal with the UN allows Mr Netanyahu to scrap the Israeli government’s original plan to give asylum seekers a choice: stay in Israel and face indefinite imprisonment or accept \$3,500 from Israeli authorities and agree to go to a “third country” like Rwanda or Uganda.

Benjamin Netanyahu said Israel had reached “unprecedented common understanding” with the UN High Commissioner for Refugees over the fate of the asylum seekers Credit: REUTERS/Ronen Zvulun

That plan was met with protests by liberal Israelis and was widely condemned by human rights groups. Activists warned that sending the asylum seekers who left [would likely end up facing torture and extortion in Libya and possible death by drowning in the Mediterranean](#).

Many of the asylum seekers said they would choose prison rather than going back to Africa and Israeli officials privately about the logistical challenges of jailing such a large population.

But Mr Netanyahu had also been under pressure from parts of the Israeli public to remove the asylum seekers, especially from neighbourhoods in south Tel Aviv where they were highly concentrated and resented by some residents.

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