

Asylum seekers feel the strain as new laws bite

Tough new asylum laws have come into force in Switzerland designed to persuade unsuccessful applicants to go home, as well as reduce the number applying. Despite cantonal variations, the situation for rejected asylum seekers is broadly similar. They have lost their right to welfare benefits and are only entitled to food, shelter and basic medical provision. In the canton of Zurich, emergency aid means CHF60 a week paid in vouchers for the supermarket chain Migros. Shelter means a six- or eight-bed dormitory in an asylum centre. World Radio Switzerland's Vincent Landon paid a visit to the Hammermühle asylum centre in Kempththal and has this report.

By [Vincent Landon](#), World Radio Switzerland

Andreas Peter, head of the asylum centre in Kempththal, presents the facilities: the main recreation room, the kitchen and the eight-bed dormitories. About 80 of the 90 beds are currently occupied by men, women and a handful of children from about 40 countries.

"This is a room for the people on a seven-day cycle," says Peter. "It looks a bit spartan because they have to move to a different centre every seven days. If they all brought a television with them and they broke down, then we would have to dispose of them; so we are a bit stricter with them and how they organise their room."

In an average week, some 15-20 of those staying at Kempththal are on this seven-day rotation. It's deliberately designed, says Peter, so they don't get too comfortable and are forced to confront their future.

A few doors down, a television breaks the monotony of bunk beds, cupboards, tables and chairs. Clothes are scattered over the beds, and half-eaten food lies on the table. Twenty-five-year-old Sylvester Onwumere is an electrician from Nigeria. He arrived in Switzerland almost six years ago and has shuttled from centre to centre.

ONWUMERE: "The journey so far. I started in Vallorbe. From Vallorbe to Chiasso; Chiasso to Zollikon; Zollikon to Affoltern; Affoltern to Kempththal. It's a long journey, so it's hard. But we don't commit suicide, because things are hard for us. We don't do that."

With the new rules, which came into force this year, rejected asylum seekers who were settled at the communal level are all being rehoused in cantonal asylum centres. Some have lived in Switzerland for years, and the new laws have dramatically curtailed their freedom of choice from where they live to what they can buy.

"With these emergency aid rules, the pressure on the individual is certainly greater than if he or she lives in the commune and life just goes on as before," says Peter.

Fifty-eight-year-old Singh Balvir from Punjab supplements his income by about CHF40 a week cleaning and sweeping. The money is also paid in Migros vouchers. Singh came to Switzerland 11 years ago. He tried to work in an Indian restaurant but was dismissed when he couldn't get a work permit. He says he would do anything for a proper job and has no plans to return to Punjab.

"Eleven years. That's half my life messed up. Where should I go? Eleven years just waiting. People say I should think about going back but I just don't know where I should go."

The Federal Migration Office says 10,387 people applied for asylum last year. Just one-fifth were successful.