

Swiss vote to adopt strict rules on asylum Rejected applicants can be deported or have aid cut off

Swiss vote to adopt strict rules on asylum The Associated Press GENEVA: Swiss voters ratified new asylum and immigration laws Sunday, making it more difficult for refugees to receive assistance and effectively blocking non-European unskilled workers from entering the country. More than 67 percent voted in favor of the stricter rules on asylum, originally approved by the Swiss government last December. The proposal was overwhelmingly accepted in all of Switzerland's 26 cantons, according to results released by the federal government. On a separate issue, voters rejected an initiative to funnel billions of dollars from the central bank's profits in the coming years to prop up the pension system. That plan aimed to redirect about \$1.2 billion annually from the Swiss National Bank to the national pension system. The government said the asylum and immigration law was designed to prevent abuses in the system caused by non-refugees~ finding ways to stay indefinitely in Switzerland. It makes it easier to send home people whose asylum requests have been rejected, an arrangement that the government said will allow it to devote more resources to real refugees. Those refusing to leave despite a rejected application can now be denied social welfare. Adults deemed to be posing as refugees can be imprisoned for up to two years and children can be kept in state custody for one year even if they are never charged with a crime. We take note of the results of the referendum and regret that it has been adopted, said William Spindler, a spokesman for the United Nations refugee agency. The Geneva-based body has criticized the law as being one of Europe's strictest, and noted that its adoption came at a time when asylum applications in Switzerland had reached a twodecade low. Critics contended the new requirements would close the door on victims of war and persecution around the world who are unable to produce valid identity papers within 48 hours of entering Switzerland, as the law demands. They said the bill adopted after heavy campaigning from the rightwing Swiss People's Party and its billionaire leader, Christoph Blocher was unrealistic in expecting rape or torture victims to be able to furnish papers after fleeing their homes. Rights groups said it could lead to violations of international law. Many don't have the opportunity to obtain documents, Spindler said. There are historical examples of oppressive authorities getting rid of documents, and it is also true today. There were 10,061 asylum applications in Switzerland last year, a 30 percent drop from 2004, according to the UN refugee agency. Most of those who sought refugee status in the country came from Serbia, Turkey, Iraq and Russia. Numbers have continued to fall this year, though Switzerland remains one of the world's top destinations for asylum seekers in proportion to its population of 7.4 million people. Sixty-eight percent of voters also approved new rules that effectively cut off legal immigration routes for unskilled workers coming from non-European countries. Supporters of the law said it would alleviate unemployment, which has risen to an estimated 5.5 percent. The second initiative voted on Sunday was the proposal to funnel off billions of Swiss francs from central bank profits to prop up the pension system, and nearly three in five cast their ballots against it. The proposal had neither the support of the government nor the nation's highly influential banking community. The program brought to referendum after 115,000 people signed a petition supported by retiree groups, labor unions and some left-wing parties aimed to redirect annually 1.5 billion Swiss francs, or \$1.2 billion, of Swiss National Bank profits to the national pension system, the AHV. The national referendum Sunday suggested eliminating the 830 million francs annually given to the federal government. Switzerland's 26 cantons would have lost 670 million francs of the 1.67 billion set aside for them in the current arrangement. Parliament and the country's governing coalition, the seven-member Federal Council, both opposed the proposal. While proponents argued that directing the funds toward pensions was a legitimate use for public money, Swiss banks and economists warned that the initiative threatened the central bank's independence by making its profits hostage to popular demands.