

5. About the concept of camps

The revised asylum act of March 1st 2019 accelerated and tightened asylum procedures and introduced so-called “federal asylum centers”. This meant the opening of national institutions for the placement of asylum seekers. We deliberately use the term “federal asylum camp” in reference to the centralized facilities for the following reasons:

- The camp imposes strict curfews that isolate asylum seekers from the rest of society.
- The camp subjects asylum seekers to laws and rights different from those that apply to Swiss citizens.
- The camp keeps inhabitants in quasi-detention by compromising their freedom and permanently controlling their movement.
- The camp restricts access to civil society and society in general. Contractual projects approved by SEM are excluded from this rule. The camp makes it difficult to control abuse of power.

We are aware of the historical connotations of the term “camp”. The authorities are also aware that living within asylum structures inevitably evokes such associations and the emotions and fears that are connected to them. Much seems to indicate that this is intentional. Police and justice secretary Elisabeth Kopp made this connection as early as 1985 on the show “Table Ouverte” on Télévision Suisse Romande, aired on December 1st 1985:

“If people [asylum seekers] are to be prevented from going into the city center to find companionship, one must stop them, of course, guard them with police and police dogs. Well, people immediately think of the situation in World War II, they say: ‘But these are concentration camps’. Well.. But if that is all we have got left, one has to look into it. But I think, currently the drawbacks might be too great. But as a last resort we will have to prepare for this as well, and as I said, we are looking into it.”¹

Switzerland separates arriving asylum seekers according to their national affiliation and their socio-economic status, with different rights applying to each category. Entering persons who are not classified as “profitable” are put in the asylum camp. We oppose such categorizations of fleeing persons and articulate the view that all people should have equal rights.

¹ Journal “Gegenlager”, Zurich, 2019. The Quote by Kopp is to be found on page 16 of Gegenlager. This journal examines and analyses the Swiss federal asylum system from different perspectives.

The Swiss asylum act

The newest revision of the asylum act led to an obvious deterioration of the situation of fleeing people. The constraints and deprivation of rights linked to the revision are to be utterly condemned. But the domain of asylum was a statutory debacle long before March 1st 2019. The asylum act is Switzerland's most revised act. It has been continually tightened since its introduction in 1981. Since political decision makers and those eligible to vote in Switzerland will never be categorized as "foreigners", the asylum and foreigner act will remain a surrogate for party politics and fear mongering and will continue being subjected to political moods.²

The six asylum regions of Switzerland

The use of violence against asylum seekers in the federal asylum camp in Basel is not an isolated incident – it's a matter of structural violence within a Switzerland-wide camp system, which again is nested in Europe-wide seclusion politics. Activists from different asylum regions in Switzerland report similar cases. Since 1st March 2020 Switzerland is sectioned in six asylum regions, each equipped with "federal asylum camps with power of procedure". Those six federal asylum camps are located in Bern (asylum region Bern), Boudry (asylum region western Switzerland), Balerna/Novazzano (TI) (asylum region central- and southern Switzerland), Altstätten (SG) (asylum region eastern Switzerland), Zurich (asylum region Zurich) and Basel (asylum region northwestern Switzerland). The federation also operates deportation camps and asylum camps for particularly "renitent" persons, which are located in secluded and poorly connected places such as Les Verrières. The asylum seekers are shuffled between those federal institutions but also between federal institutions and cantonal asylum housings, without consideration of the asylum seeker's wishes or connections to specific places or people. Every canton manages asylum housings, accommodating both asylum seekers treated according to the old procedure (before 1st March 2019) and rejected asylum seekers.

² Martino Mona: "Migrationsverhinderung und Recht auf Einwanderung", Lecture at the conference "Flucht, Integration, Migration" at the University of Bern on April 5th 2016. Accessible on Youtube (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=naWRVkJiRlo>).