

Swedish student's plane protest stops Afghan man's deportation 'to hell'

Elin Ersson refused to sit down on Gothenburg flight until man being sent to Afghanistan was removed.

David Crouch in Gothenburg. First published on Wed 25 Jul 2018, theguardian.com

5 A lone student activist on board a plane at Gothenburg airport has prevented the deportation of an Afghan asylum seeker from Sweden by refusing to sit down until the man was removed from the flight.

Her successful protest, footage of which spread rapidly across the internet, shines a spotlight on domestic opposition to Sweden's tough asylum regime, at a time when immigration and asylum are topping the agenda of a general election campaign in which the far right is polling strongly.

10 "I hope that people start questioning how their country treats refugees," Elin Ersson, 21, told the Guardian in an interview. "We need to start seeing the people whose lives our immigration [policies] are destroying."

The social work student at Gothenburg University bought a ticket for the flight from Gothenburg to Turkey on Monday morning, after she and other asylum activists found out that a young Afghan was due to be deported on it. In fact he was not on the plane but activists discovered another Afghan man in his 50s was onboard for deportation.

As she entered the plane, Ersson started to livestream her protest in English. The video received more than 4m hits on Tuesday.

15 Facing both sympathy and hostility from passengers, the footage shows Ersson struggling to keep her composure. "I don't want a man's life to be taken away just because you don't want to miss your flight," she says. "I am not going to sit down until the person is off the plane."

20 Repeatedly told by a steward to stop filming, Ersson says: "I am doing what I can to save a person's life. As long as a person is standing up the pilot cannot take off. All I want to do is stop the deportation and then I will comply with the rules here. This is all perfectly legal and I have not committed a crime."

When an angry passenger, who appears to be English, tries to seize her phone, she tells him: "What is more important, a life, or your time? ... I want him to get off the plane because he is not safe in Afghanistan. I am trying to change my country's rules, I don't like them. It is not right to send people to hell."

25 After a tense standoff, during which the airport authorities declined to use force to eject Ersson, passengers broke into applause when the asylum seeker was taken off the plane.

Ersson told the Guardian she had been volunteering with refugee groups for about a year.

30 "People [in Afghanistan] are not sure of any safety," she said. "They don't know if they're going to live another day. As I've been working and meeting people from Afghanistan and heard their stories, I've been more and more in the belief that no one should be deported to Afghanistan because it's not a safe place. The way that we are treating refugees right now, I think that we can do better, especially in a rich country like Sweden."

As the country heads towards a general election in September, Sweden's centre-left coalition government is keen to keep up expulsions of asylum seekers whose applications have been turned down. "If you get rejected, you have to go home – otherwise we will not have a proper migration system," the prime minister, Stefan Löfven, said last year after an Uzbek asylum seeker whose claim had been rejected drove a truck into shoppers in Stockholm, killing five people.

35 After Taliban violence increased in January, the country briefly halted deportations to Afghanistan. But the Swedish migration board stands by its assessment that the country is a safe destination for asylum seekers whose claims have been turned down.

In its most recent assessment, the migration board said Taliban attacks had been aimed mainly at the military or foreigners, and violence against Afghan civilians was rare. As for a bomb in an ambulance in January that killed at least 95 and injured many more in Kabul, the board said it was "unclear whether the purpose was really to attack civilians".

40 Tens of thousands of deportation cases are expected to be handed over to the police as the country continues to process a backlog of asylum applications, after 163,000 people claimed asylum in Sweden in 2015. Last year, the border police deported 12,500 people, while the rate of expulsions so far this year is slightly higher.

Normally deportations go peacefully, according to a spokesperson for the police in Sweden's west region. But occasionally the process is disrupted by demonstrators such as Ersson or by asylum seekers themselves.

45 “You do it once or twice, and if it doesn’t work we rent a private plane to send them back to Afghanistan, or wherever,” the spokesperson said.

Ersson’s protest was a civil and not a criminal case, he said. Should the airline and passengers decide to prosecute, Ersson could face a substantial fine.

50 When the refugee crisis began to escalate 2015, Sweden made it much harder for refugees to get into the country and asylum applications fell sharply. In 2016 almost 29,000 people claimed asylum, followed by just under 26,000 last year. So far this year, asylum applications are running at about 1,500 a month.

The fates of the young man due to be deported on Monday, and the man who was on the plane, are unknown. A spokesperson for the Swedish Prison and Probation Service confirmed that the young man would be deported again, once transport was found. The Swedish border police in Kalmar, responsible for the attempted deportation, did not return calls from the Guardian.

55 Ersson believes the young man was taken to Stockholm and put on a flight there already.

“This is how deportations in Sweden work. The people involved know nothing and they are not allowed to reach out to their lawyers or family,” she said. “My ultimate goal is to end deportations to Afghanistan.”

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