

# String of knife attacks further fuels debate over refugees and violence



Photo: DPA

A spate of bloody knife attacks in recent weeks has led to concerns about a rise in knife crime. The fact that teenage refugees have often been the culprits has also fired up right-wing critics of the government.

On Tuesday morning a 24-year-old woman's life still hung in the balance after she was stabbed on Saturday in the town of Burgwedel in Lower Saxony. After undergoing an emergency operation she was placed in an artificial coma.

The woman and her boyfriend had reportedly become involved in an argument with a group of three teenagers from Syria. When the situation turned aggressive, the woman attempted to intervene, but one of the teenagers pulled out a knife and stabbed her.

On the same day in Bochum a 15-year-old schoolboy was stabbed during a fight involving around 20 teenagers. A 16-year-old from Syria was arrested over the attack. The victim was treated in hospital but his situation is not life threatening.

A day earlier, at Wiesbaden central station an argument escalated between two groups of men. One of them pulled a knife and left three others injured. The suspected culprit is from Afghanistan.

The series of bloody incidents over the weekend come in the wake of two murderous stabbings by refugees in recent months, at least one of which appears to have been motivated by jealousy.

In Flensburg an Afghan teenager was arrested early this month on suspicion of stabbing a girl a year his junior to death. The teenager was said to have often visited his victim before the murder. That crime followed another brutal murder in December in the town of Kandel in Rhineland Palatinate where a 15-year-old girl was murdered by her ex-boyfriend, also an asylum seeker from Afghanistan.

Not all the suspects in the recent spate of stabbings have been refugees. In Hanover over the weekend a group of three masked individuals attacked a 17-year-old, stabbing him in the leg after he had refused to hand over his mobile telephone. The trio reportedly spoke accentless German. In Berlin over the weekend at a nightclub, an Iraqi man was furthermore stabbed by a German following an argument.

At least seven knife attacks were recorded last weekend alone.

And in Berlin early this month a teenage German boy was arrested on suspicion of murdering a 14-year-old girl. She was found dead in her apartment with several stab wounds.

Nonetheless, the prevalence of asylum seekers as suspects in these crimes has given voice to those who say that the government's liberal refugee policies have made the country less safe.

"The knives are growing longer, the attackers are ever younger. The number of knife attacks by asylum seekers grows constantly," Alice Weidel, co-parliamentary leader of the Alternative for Germany, wrote on Facebook on Monday.

"I call on Interior minister Horst Seehofer to immediately take the suspects into detention pending deportation and then to eject them from the country," she said. "It needs to be clear that the state is using all its power to protect its citizens."

The German government in September 2015 opened its borders to refugees from Syria, leading to mass arrivals of asylum seekers over several months. Between 2015 and the middle of 2017, over 1.3 million asylum seekers arrived in the country.

With police statistics showing that refugees and asylum seekers are significantly over-represented in violent crime statistics, the political mood has been raw for some time.

In 2016, irregular migrants (a category including refugees, asylum seekers and people awaiting deportation) were suspects in some 12 percent of homicide cases, despite making up less than two percent of the population.

But there are currently no comprehensive statistics on knife crime, making it difficult to make accurate statements about the severity of the increase in

stabblings. Police unions are now calling for knife crime to be published in nationwide statistics.

Dietmar Schilff, a spokesman for the German Police Union, told DPA on Tuesday that more and more teenagers were carrying knives around with them.

“We are witnessing a dangerous trend - within a split second a life-threatening situation can develop,” he said.

“We need to know where such attacks are happening most regularly and who is carrying them out, so that we can react better,” he added.

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