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Race Riots Rage in Southern Spain

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Last week, from February 8 to 11, ferocious race riots raged in the southeastern Spanish town of El Ejido, near the port city of Almeria. Vigilante groups, armed with clubs and iron bars, roamed the streets looting African-owned stores, blocking roads with burning tires, and firebombing immigrant homes. According to the Spanish National Radio (RNE), marauding gangs set ablaze two recycling plants, as well as nearby farms, where African immigrants -- predominantly Moroccans, but also Senegalese, Algerians, and Gambians -- work as seasonal agricultural laborers. Thus far, 52 Africans have been injured.

Tensions have simmered of late in El Ejido because of a strike initiated by immigrant workers clamoring for better pay and working conditions. The strike started just when fruits and vegetables in the region's plastic-tented farms were ripening, and cost farmers an estimated \$6 million a day. The strike was ended after workers reached an agreement with local authorities, but concern over the loss of profits is detectable in the statements of liberal and conservative politicians alike. "Thousands and thousands of immigrants work in this zone where, it must not be forgotten, they did not appear by magic but because we needed them from an economic point of view," declared Andalusia's regional president Manuel Chaves. "If they left, El Ejido's economic activity would collapse."

Last week's attacks were triggered by the stabbing death of a 26-year-old Spanish woman, Encarnacion Lopez, on Saturday February 5, allegedly by a mentally ill Moroccan man who tried to snatch her purse in a flea market. The stabbing came on the heels of the murder of two Spanish farmers by a 22-year-old Moroccan worker, who reportedly slit one man's throat and bludgeoned the other man's skull. The night before Lopez's funeral, some 10,000 people gathered in El Ejido and chanted anti-immigrant slogans. Gangs organized a "punishment mission" and made plans to carry out Ku Klux Klan-style nighttime attacks, but were stopped by authorities before reaching the part of El Ejido inhabited by immigrants. During the funeral

procession itself, the governor of the Almeria province, Fernando Hermoso was jeered and beaten for not taking necessary measures to deal with the "Moros" (as Moroccans are often pejoratively referred to in Spain), and forced to take refuge in a church with the local mayor, Juan Enciso, and the regional administrator Jose Torres Hurtado.

Riots and fires consumed El Ejido on February 7 and 8. As of Tuesday February 8, the police had made no arrests, claiming that their immediate objective was to keep the two sides apart, and promised to make arrests after studying film of the attacks. After three days of violence, the police reported that they had arrested 42 people -- but only 16 Spaniards. Opposition politicians in Madrid denounced the slow police response. Socialist leader Joaquin Almeria openly criticized the slow dispatch of reinforcements from Madrid and noted that terrified immigrants were leaving the cheap labor-dependent region. According to the *Financial Times*, rioters have caused an estimated \$58.8 million in damage, and driven hundreds of immigrant workers to nearby hills, where the Red Cross set up field kitchens to feed the refugees.

On Thursday February 10, government spokesman Josep Pique admitted that the police could have done more to prevent the violence. According to United Press International, Moroccan Secretary of State for Cooperation Aisha Belarbi deplored "the hunt for Moroccans" and in a meeting with Spanish Foreign Minister Abel Matutes, called for measures to "improve the living conditions [of immigrants] and integration." Matutes, in turn, appealed for calm and warned that if Spain was to compete in the global economy, the Spanish people must learn to accept the presence of immigrants.

El Ejido has approximately 10,000 immigrant workers, 20 percent of the town's population, most of whom labor in what locals call "seas of plastic" -- almost 60,000 acres of greenhouse agriculture. Those who are legal earn 5,000 pesetas (\$30) a day, while clandestine workers make half that amount. The local greenhouse agriculture economy employs about 100,000 people, producing 3 tons of farm products annually (\$100 billion) for markets in Europe.

Non-governmental organization reports on the work and living conditions of the African workers have painted a discouraging picture. Fifty-seven percent of the workers live in ramshackle huts on the farms, while others live in the squalor of nearby shanty towns. Fifty-five percent lack running water. Reports have also highlighted the overheated greenhouses, where temperatures climb to 105° F, in which Africans labor on a daily basis, and the widespread use of hazardous chemical fertilizers and pesticides.

The outbreak of racial violence is relatively new to Spain, which has one of the smallest immigrant communities in Western Europe. Spain, a country whose development was partly financed by Spanish workers in northern Europe, is now a prosperous EU member relying on cheap imported labor. A UN report released in January stated that Spain, which has one of the world's lowest birth rates, will need to bring in another 12 million foreigners by 2050 if it is to maintain its labor force at current levels. Most of the foreign workers currently in southern Spain are young men from different African countries who made their way to the Iberian Peninsula in rowboats from northern Morocco across the Straits of Gibraltar. Colloquially referred to as "wetbacks" ("mojaditos") after illegal Mexican immigrants to the United States who enter the U.S. across the Rio Grande, these Africans, from as far away as Congo and Mali, risk their lives in the treacherous waters of the Straits to escape the deep poverty and turmoil of their respective countries. In 1999 alone, 75 bodies of would-be migrants washed up on the swarming tourist beaches of southern Spain. And on Wednesday February 9, even

as the race riots continued, the Spanish Coast Guard caught 59 "boat people," bringing to 101 the number intercepted since February 7.

Local authorities have portrayed El Ejido's racial rampage as an isolated incident, blaming the violence on alcoholism, drug abuse, and neo-Nazi activity. However, anti-immigrants attacks carried out in the last few months include the stabbing of a young Moroccan near Barcelona, the fire-bombing of a mosque in the northeastern city of Girona, and the burning down of a house occupied by three Gambian families in the nearby town of Banyoles.

Twenty-five years after the death of the nationalist military leader Francisco Franco, Spain is facing a resurgence in far-right fascist activity by youths seeking a return to the "racial purity" and "moral order" preached by the Generalissimo. Fascist groups, whose symbol is the old Francista flag, featuring a black eagle in place of the shield on today's Spanish flag, propagate their hatred via rock music and the Internet. (In fact, authorities in El Ejido say the recent violence was organized through a neo-Nazi Internet campaign.)

Neo-fascism in Spain is also gaining access to the political system. After the Ejido outbreak, Jesus Gil, football tycoon and ultra-conservative mayor of the southern city of Marbella, said his Grupo Independente Liberal (GIL) would challenge Prime Minister Aznar's center-right Popular Party in the upcoming March elections. "I have never been more convinced that we lived better under Franco," Gil told a rally of supporters in Madrid, vowing to clean up the Spanish political system and defend Ceuta and Melilla, Spain's colonies in northern Morocco.

The El Ejido episode has drawn much-needed attention to the misery of immigrant life in southern Spanish agricultural areas. Politicians have promised to build decent housing, and Interior Minister Javier Mayor Oreja said Spain needed to create a government department to deal with immigrants. But the conservative government of Jose Maria Aznar is also reconsidering a bill approved by parliament last month that would allow 70,000 illegal immigrants in Spain to become eligible for residency permits. Aznar is promising to amend the bill, which is considered one of the most liberal of its kind in the European Union, if returned to power in next month's elections.

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