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Switzerland: Detainee's Death Reignites Calls to End Immigration Detention

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In the morning of Saturday 8 April, a male immigration detainee was found unconscious in his cell in Geneva's Favra detention facility. His death has prompted renewed calls for authorities to close the controversial centre.

According to a [press release](#) from the Department of Security, Population and Health (DSPS), the man ([reportedly](#) a Tunisian awaiting deportation to Austria) was found unresponsive at 8am, but "despite the efforts made by both the staff of the establishment and the emergency services, the doctor could only confirm the death." The Public Prosecutor's Office has opened an investigation, but the circumstances around the man's death have not been released.

Calls for reform

In the wake of the man's death, human rights groups in Switzerland have called for authorities to permanently close the facility—and to end the practice of immigration detention across the country more widely. In a statement, the Swiss League for Human Rights [said](#): "LSDH-Geneva urges the authorities to shed light on this tragedy in full transparency, to close Favra prison without delay and, more generally, to waive administrative detention so that such a tragedy never happens again."

Such calls are not new. Rights groups have previously urged authorities to shutter Favra, denouncing the detention conditions that migrants and asylum seekers face inside. Originally established as a criminal facility, [Favra](#) (*Établissement de detention administrative de Favra*) was repurposed for administrative detention in 2014. The 20-person centre has long been criticised for poor, and overly carceral, detention conditions—including inadequate healthcare provision (there is no on-site medical presence), minimal time outdoors, and limited freedom of movement.

According to the [Citizen's Observatory of Deaths in Swiss Prisons, the Association of Progressive Jurists, and the Swiss League for Human Rights](#), the centre is also dilapidated and completely unsuitable for depriving individuals of their liberty. In 2021, the National Commission for the Prevention of Torture [urged](#) authorities "to no longer use the Favra establishment for administrative detention and to transfer administrative detainees to an establishment intended for this purpose."

Unlike nearly all other countries in Europe, Switzerland continues to use prisons for immigration detention purposes. Of the more than 30 detention sites used to confine migrants and asylum seekers in the country, only five are specialised immigration detention facilities.

A drive against immigration

Immigration and asylum policies are the subject of heated public debates in Switzerland. The country has one of the highest proportions of "non-citizen" residents in the world and immigration is the key driving force behind the country's population growth. In 2022, it received [24,500 asylum applications](#), mostly from individuals from Turkey and Afghanistan. 75,000 Ukrainians have also received special temporary protection in the country since February 2022.

The right-wing Swiss People's Party has long campaigned to block the arrival of migrants and asylum seekers in the country, most recently [stating](#) in January 2023 that it wants to put a stop to "disproportionate and harmful" immigration, and declaring its desire to relocate asylum procedures to centres outside of the country—similar to the UK's Rwanda plan.

Last year, media outlets [reported](#) that Swiss authorities were allowing hundreds of migrants to enter the EU, with some even saying that Switzerland was actively assisting migrants in their journeys north. In response to these reports, a spokesman for the opposition conservative parties in the German parliament [accused](#) Switzerland of attempting to make sure asylum seekers don't claim asylum there.



The Favra detention centre is in the Canton of Geneva, and was originally established as a criminal facility. (Source: Swiss League for Human Rights)

The country has also been accused of double standards, because it has welcomed tens of thousands of Ukrainians but denied asylum to other nationalities such as [Afghans](#)—something that the Global Detention Project has [highlighted is occurring in countries across Europe](#).

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