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France Deports More Illegal Immigrants, but Shies From Children

By KATRIN BENNHOLD

PARIS, Sept. 2 — France has accelerated its deportation of illegal immigrants and is more than halfway toward its 2006 target of 25,000, the Interior Ministry says, but with a new school year approaching the government appears to have largely refrained from expelling families with school-age children.

The interior minister, Nicolas Sarkozy, vowed to step up the pace of expulsions after suburban riots last fall in areas largely inhabited by people of foreign extraction. The deportations — mainly of Africans, Asians and East Europeans — reached 12,716 as of July 31 and sped up in August, said Franck Louvrier, a spokesman for Mr. Sarkozy.

But while support for stemming illegal immigration is broad, Mr. Sarkozy — a contender in presidential elections only eight months away — must also contend with the public's sympathy for children threatened by expulsion. That was in full view on Wednesday, when passengers on an Air France flight to Lagos tried to prevent the plane from taking off after they learned that a Nigerian youth was being deported. In the spring, after parents and teachers hid children without legal status, Mr. Sarkozy froze deportations until the end of the school year and offered to legalize 6,000 families. Nearly 30,000 have applied.

Since early July, only four high school students and two primary school pupils are known to have been deported, according to the Education Without Borders Network, which has organized protests and collected more than 100,000 signatures in its campaign to protect children from deportation. "Sarkozy knows this is political dynamite," said Richard Moyon, a founder of the network. "I don't think he can afford to go after the tens of thousands of children who are in France illegally."

France has 4.9 million immigrants, slightly more than 8 percent of the population, according to Insee, the national statistics office. The government estimates that 200,000 to 400,000 foreigners are here illegally.

The incident on Wednesday involved Jeff Babatunde, 19, a Nigerian who arrived in France illegally in 2004 and was arrested Aug. 1. He says his mother was an advocate of political causes in Nigeria and was shot in a demonstration in 2004, leaving him without family there. The government says there is no evidence to support his story.

His flight back to Nigeria left from Charles de Gaulle Airport, and advocates and opposition politicians including Jack Lang, a former Socialist education minister and current presidential contender, demonstrated. Two passengers were arrested when a protest erupted on the plane.

France has other high-profile immigrant cases. In Limoges, in central France, 44 Africans are on their fourth week of a hunger strike, trying to force the government to give them residency papers.

At the same time, the far right accuses Mr. Sarkozy of being too soft.

This week, Jean-Marie Le Pen, the leader of the National Front, went on the attack after an Algerian immigrant and former prison inmate who was saved from deportation by Mr. Sarkozy three years ago stole a car and burst through police barriers outside a building where Prime Minister Dominique de Villepin was speaking. In 2003, Mr. Sarkozy repealed the longstanding practice of expelling immigrants convicted of crimes after they had served their prison terms.

Mr. Sarkozy said the Algerian, Cherif Bouchelaleg, should be punished severely, but he stood by his repeal of double jeopardy laws. "It's not about sending him away, because he'd just come back," he said. "The issue is the severest possible punishment for repeat offenders."