



# Newsletter

www.rsgdevon.org.uk

## A very sad farewell to Vanessa

*Vanessa, who volunteered with Refugee Support Group Devon for more than 7 years, passed away on 26 April. During her time with RSG she rarely took any time off and volunteered tirelessly, often for two days or more each week. If you ever came to RSG on a Monday or a Thursday you will be sure to have met her.*

Vanessa was very passionate about justice and anti discrimination. She was a sterling advocate for individuals who faced persistent barriers by our society / government systems. She was also extremely kind and generous and extended her personal support in excess of that required as a volunteer with RSG.

Of all the help she offered, Vanessa most enjoyed the role of helping destitute asylum seekers. She administered RSG's Emergency Fund to those in hardship each week and, along with her son Sam, was also a most generous benefactor to the fund. Vanessa kept the drop-in service regularly supplied with snacks and food, primarily for those destitute asylum seekers – many of us will remember the sharp ticking off for grabbing a cake before the guys had had first offering! She remembered people's favourite treats, be they a specific chocolate bar or a flavour of crisp, and ensured she had supplies in plenty when she would next meet them.

Vanessa made sure those that those who most needed help were offered it – she accompanied young asylum seekers to solicitors and health appointments – often requiring setting

off for London or Cardiff at 6am, and returning well into the evening. She supported the most vulnerable during their asylum appeal hearings, particularly where no legal representatives were available, and acted as a true friend or relative during the most difficult times.

Support was not extended just to the client group of RSG – Vanessa was most generous and kind to other volunteers and staff. She was interested in people's lives and enjoyed setting the world to rights with like-minded people. An avid reader, of news, current affairs and novels, there was always an interesting discussion to be had, and lots of reading material to share.

Vanessa had a sharp tongue where one was needed and a huge heart for everyone else. It has been an absolute privilege to have had Vanessa in our lives. She will be sorely missed by all.

[AH]

### IMPROVE YOUR ENGLISH

Free English classes for refugees and asylum seekers: Mondays, at the RSG office, 5-7pm. No need to book a place, just come

(Note: office closed till 5pm when class starts)

### The drop-in centre

Unfortunately we are having to reduce our hours again. The new hours for the drop-in service from Monday 16th May are Tuesdays and Thursdays 10-12 and 2-4 ... but watch this space, because we are constantly assessing the work being done and the best way to keep RSG going through tough financial times. This has obviously been a very difficult decision, but with staff only working three days a week because of decreased

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**RSG's future will be what YOU make it! How do you see it? What do you want its priorities to be?**

### Will you help?

#### YOU COULD

- become a volunteer, or
- become a trustee, or
- help with local fundraising, or
- help to organise events, and
- tell us what you think, whether you are already a service user or volunteer, or simply interested in our work.

*Please come to an open meeting on Wednesday 8 June at Exeter Phoenix arts centre, Gandy Street, 6 to 8 pm*

For more details, ring the RSG office on (01392) 682185 on a Tuesday, Wednesday or Thursday

#### Also in this issue

Amnesty sleepout, women's project and trustee report (next page)

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**REFUGEE SUPPORT GROUP DEVON**

[www.rsgdevon.org.uk](http://www.rsgdevon.org.uk)

93 Fore Street  
Exeter  
EX4 3HY  
(Note: entrance is in Market Street. Access by stairs only: please telephone if you need help.)

Telephone:  
01392 682185 or 247511

**EDITORS**

Jeremy Cushing and Colin Stiff

**Amnesty International sleepout for asylum seekers**



On 24th February Exeter University's Amnesty International Society held a sleepout in order to raise awareness for destitute asylum seekers. A group of AI members spent a night on campus with only their sleeping bags, as many layers as they could manage to

wear, and a comfortable cardboard-on-concrete mattress as protection.

Exeter's MP, Ben Bradshaw, visited the sleepout, and was lobbied to sign a petition to allow those asylum seekers whose cases remain unresolved after 6 months to

be given the right to work. As a result of an AI campaign on campus we were able to present him with around 300 signatures. Although he stuck to the Labour Party line, refusing to sign anything until he had 'asked permission', he was receptive.

**RSG trustees**

Future meetings will be on Wednesday 8th June (open to all, at the Phoenix Centre, 5.30 pm) and Wednesday 6th July (also 5.30, at the RSG office). For information contact the office (see above).

Every ordinary meeting starts by considering any proposals or requests put forward by asylum seekers, which are particularly welcome. Agenda items to the office if possible two weeks before the meeting.

*NB views expressed in this newsletter are not necessarily those of the Refugee Support Group Devon*

**Women's outreach project**

Recently there's been a lot of discussion about the future of the women's outreach project, and especially the popular home tuition facility.

Some of the discussion arises out of the idea that RSG's office-based service can no longer be funded and may have to close, meaning that any savings on the women's project could enable us to keep it open longer. Some arises from the fact that the women's project has catered mostly for a generation of women and children who arrived in Exe-

ter about two years ago. Maybe they are now integrated and no longer need the project?

Actually the idea that the women's project is costly is a myth. It is run on a shoestring. The need to recruit, assess and support a large group of volunteer teachers (currently 13) makes it virtually impossible to run without a small amount of paid work. (Anyone who wants to try is welcome to come forward.) The volunteers charge only minimal expenses. If we closed the whole thing down tomorrow it would not make a real dent in RSG's budget deficit.

Another myth is that the project is catering for people who no longer need it. Anna Pawlyn, one of the teachers, writes 'Catapulted into the totally alien culture of the UK, [their previously] all-important social network suddenly either ceases to exist or is far smaller and unlikely to include any members of their own family. Loneliness and depression are very common among the client group, so the opportunities to get out of the house and to meet other women that the Women's Group provides are invaluable'. It is also, of course, true that the project is an excellent way of promoting understanding between cultures, which gives it a value even beyond its usefulness to individuals.

**Trustee report**

Trustees met on 22 March, 6 April (thanks to Mary and Colin Fry) and 11 May.

**Exit strategies**

In view of the funding crisis trustees naturally spent time discussing possible ways of reducing costs without throwing out vital elements of our services. The obvious possibilities

were closing down, passing on responsibilities

to other agencies or somehow providing a slimmed-down service. The problem with the (much preferred) last option was that our service makes heavy use of volunteers, and this is almost impossible to manage without premises and paid staff.

The future of the Women's Project was a cause of considerable

anxiety (see above). But it was clear that it was an immensely valued service and we should make all possible efforts to keep it going in some form.

**Open meeting**

To pursue this agenda it was decided that the trustee meeting scheduled for 8th June will be open to all comers. We are hoping to recruit new trustees, members and volunteers to help with the job of restructuring RSG's functioning to allow for, at least

in the medium term, severely diminished resources. Difficult: but a real challenge!

**New trustee**

Ali Mousavi was elected trustee at the meeting on 6th April.

**Fundraising**

The office had succeeded in raising about £15,000 from a number of sources, thus offering some breathing space and greater prospects of an orderly restructuring.

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funding it is not possible to continue in the same way as before. We will now be closed on Mondays, as it was the day we were seeing the fewest visitors. We are hoping to have a sustainable service with minimal costs in place by October 2011. We will keep you posted on all the developments, but after the closure of so many fantastic local services in recent months, we are adamant we must do everything we can to keep RSG open.

**Community fundraising**

A big thank you to our community fundraising group, who had their first event last month and raised nearly £100 from a bake sale at Exeter University! A brilliant start to their efforts and it has certainly set the ball rolling. We have Exeter Respect Festival and Refugee Week coming up in June (see below) and this will no doubt see some more fundraising successes. We would love it if you could help us too – whether it is by donating, subscribing as a member or organising a small event (anything from a jumble sale, to a skydive) every little counts!

**Refugee Week and CDs**

Refugee Week is coming up fast! This year the annual celebration is being held nationally from 20-26 June. Our programme of events in Devon is just being finalised at the time of writing, but events confirmed so far include the ever popular football tournament, this year being held in conjunction with the Kick It Out campaign, displays around

the county, an art installation in the Exeter Phoenix by local refugee artist Ali Mousavi and the World at Lunch discussion group hosted by the Global Centre. We are searching for a new venue for our coffee morning owing to the renovation of St Stephen's Church – please get in touch if you can help with an alternate option! Our full programme of events with dates, times and venues will be available soon on our website [rsgdevon.org.uk](http://rsgdevon.org.uk) at the beginning of June.

**Respect Festival**

Exeter Respect Festival, the city's annual celebration of diversity, is being held this year on Saturday 4 and Sunday 5 June in Belmont Park in Exeter. It is a free event with music, food, entertainment and campaigns and there is definitely something for everyone! The event is also dedicated to the memory of Fran Jenkin, who was the Chair of RSG until her untimely passing last summer and is still very much in the hearts of everyone at RSG. We will have a stall with information about the work of RSG and how to get involved, as well as some other goodies - we hope to see you there!

**Anti-trafficking event**

We are delighted to announce we are helping to put on an event on 12th July at Exeter Phoenix (time to be confirmed) to raise awareness of human trafficking. Trafficking is a horrific form of modern-day slavery and affects millions of people across the globe. Even more shockingly, it is happening locally in the South West of

England, completely unnoticed by the majority of local residents. We are putting on the event in partnership with Unchosen, Anti-Slavery Exeter and the Bath Trauma Recovery Centre. There will be a showing of Ghosts, the Bafta award-winning film directed by Nick Broomfield, as well as a discussion panel with guest speakers, including Nick Broomfield (who is also Honorary President of Unchosen) via video link to answer questions from the floor. There will be a particular focus on the issue of forced labour, as Ghosts is based on the Morecambe Bay tragedy, when 23 Chinese migrants, who had been trafficked and exploited for cheap labour, drowned as they were picking cockles. We hope that the event will raise awareness of the issue and perhaps help to consolidate a local anti-trafficking network. Please get in touch with Emma Marshall on 01392 682185 (Tuesday-Thursday) if you would like to help. We will get a team of people together by the end of May to publicise the event.

**English classes**

Free English classes are now held at RSG on a Monday evening from 5-7pm. These are aimed at refugees and asylum seekers and run by experienced volunteers. The classes can be tailored to individual needs, and may be particularly useful for those needing extra help reading and writing. *See panel on page 1.*

[EM]

**News roundup for April-May****Deportations resume**

In March the government resumed deportations to Baghdad, in collaboration with Sweden. This ignored protests from the UN which said that the five central regions of Iraq were not safe. In November last year Aland Salimi, who was deported to Iraq, claimed that he was beaten up and starved by the Iraqi police.

This follows a decision to resume deportations to Zimbabwe, also announced in March. But the Asylum and Immigration Tribunal ruled that anyone without connections to Zanu PF (Mugabe's party) would be liable to harm, especially if he or she had MDC associations.

**Asylum seeker deaths**

Campaigners are planning to ask the UN's special rapporteur on torture to put pres-

sure on the UK to investigate the death of Jimmy Mubenga, who was allegedly killed by employees of G4S Security last

October. Mr Mubenga's widow, Adrienne Makenda Kambana (pictured), said 'Jimmy was a loving and caring father and husband. My children and I don't understand why he was being deported ... We don't want this to happen to anyone else. We want to know how and why this happened to Jimmy. Why did he die?' Meanwhile JCWI pointed out that he was the '77th person to die as a result of the UK's asylum policies since 2006'.

**Immigration**

6th April saw the introduction of the coalition's immigration cap. Sceptics said it wouldn't work, as it doesn't apply to illegal immigration or migrants from the EU. Net immigration rose to 196,000 last year, but mainly



because out-migration decreased and the number of visiting students increased. (Emigration usually increases in recessions, but is very

difficult to measure.) Students made up 60% of non-EU migrants, so the government's target could not be met without cutting their numbers. UK higher education makes about £40bn, one of our bigger exports, not to mention the huge benefits in 'soft power', so opposition is intense.

[JC]

# Can 'liberal intervention' work?

*The 'Arab Spring' has brought the concept of 'liberal intervention' to the fore again. However an organisation in Afghanistan can teach us a great deal about how to deal with states that violate the human rights of their citizens*

Afghanistan has been in a state of civil war, more or less, since the collapse of the monarchy in 1973. The overthrow of King Zahir Shah was followed by a period between 1973 and 1979 when the country was convulsed by the struggle between different Marxist factions; then between 1979 and 1989 a new civil war broke out with nationalist rebels (the 'mujahideen') fighting Soviet occupiers and the west supporting the mujahideen. Between 1992 and 1996 mujahideen warlords fought amongst themselves, wrecking the country and especially Kabul, while imposing extreme fundamentalist rules, especially on women. Then the Taliban (supported by Pakistan), between 1994 and 2001 imposed a regime on the south of the country which was just as oppressive as that of the mujahideen, and fought another civil war against a 'northern alliance' of warlords. In 2001 following 9/11 the US organised the defeat of the Taliban by the warlords, amid horrific atrocities. Yet another new state was then imposed by the US, based mostly on the same warlords, and an increasingly savage Taliban response has generated a new civil war.

This entire period, of 38 years, has been characterised by foreign intervention but also by massive human rights violations. Afghanistan has run with the blood of civilians. There seems no end to the savagery, and meanwhile the new puppet Afghan government, this time supported by western intervention, is third from the bottom of Transparency International's world corruption perception index. Recently Save the Children has rated Afghanistan worst in the world for the experience of being a mother. Meanwhile the west has noticeably lost enthusiasm for promoting women's rights.

The problems arising when the international community tries to intervene are thus becoming increasingly clear, and Afghanistan is a textbook example. One organisation has definite views on the subject: the Revolutionary Association of Afghan Women (RAWA).

RAWA was founded in 1977, in the middle of the Marxist period and two years before the Soviets invaded. It was the creation of, among others, a charismatic young woman called Meena (pictured). Meena was hugely influential in creating an organisation which still survives and flourishes in an atmosphere in which women are seen by many as 'less important than a walking stick', and in which they are often treated with cruelty and repression which truly shocks. Meena's

husband (who founded a radical organisation quite separate from RAWA) was murdered by a warlord faction in 1986. Meena herself was also murdered (probably on the instigation of the Afghan KGB) in 1987. Since then RAWA has worked out methods of survival by spreading responsibility among members and by rigorous security procedures.

RAWA has very clear views on foreign intervention: they fought against the Soviets; now they advocate throwing the Americans out as well. Thus, after decades of work trying to emancipate their country, they have decided that foreign soldiers are not the answer.

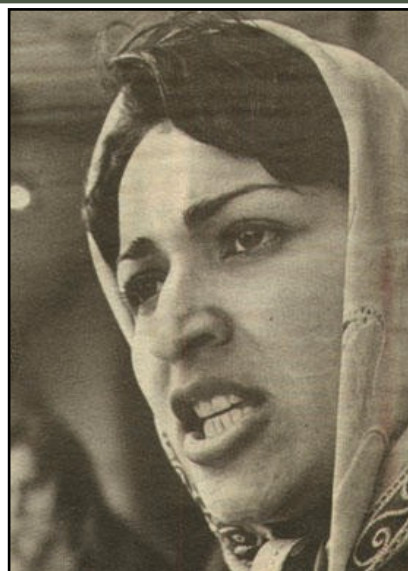
RAWA's approach is complex and constantly reviewed. Its members and supporters combine almost unbelievable bravery with political and organisational skills no outsider could match. Its survival through more than three decades of bloody chaos testifies to its effectiveness, in face of opposition from many sides. (Some think RAWA is communist, some that it's a CIA front, others that RAWA members simply want to go out on the streets in order to 'touch men's bodies'.) Their opposition to the war criminals who make up much of the Karzai government, and simultaneously to the Taliban and the US, should ensure their rapid suppression, but they carry on.

If Afghanistan is ever to be granted peace and human rights, it seems more likely that the work of organisations like RAWA will achieve it than that NATO will, or any system set up under Karzai. But is withdrawal the best way to further this?

One obvious way to find out how we can help is to look at the 'Help us' page on the RAWA website. There you will find a long list of possible actions: from helping to pay for RAWA's schools to donating video cameras (used for filming human rights abuses). What you will *not* find is a request to send soldiers to fight the Taliban.

Perhaps the most frustrating aspect of 'liberal interventionism' is that we helped to create the problems in the first place. Many of the most oppressive regimes in the world were built on European colonies (like Burma or Yemen or Zimbabwe), or came into being as a result of the west supporting any regime which was reliably anti-communist (like Somalia); or by getting caught up in struggles among the great powers (like Afghanistan). We can't go back and undo our actions done in the past, and attempts to help now often seem merely to increase the damage.

However there are obvious things we could do. One would be to restrain our banks from helping to fund oppression



(most recently HSBC, alleged to have been funding the hijacking by Egyptian elites of land for development), or hiding vast sums stolen from poor countries by their rulers. Another would be to stop subsidising our farmers so that farmers in poor countries can't compete. Yet another would be to stop selling arms to repressive regimes (our PM was at it only two months ago). Possibly we might stop stealing professionals (like nurses) trained in poor countries at vast cost to their governments. Or restrain western corporations which exploit workers or bribe rulers. Or stop training organisations which torture and murder for dictators (like Bangladesh's Rapid Action Battalion, trained by the UK National Policing Improvement Agency; or the many organisations whose officers have been trained in the US School of the Americas over the decades). In these and innumerable other ways we help to maintain the unjust systems which ultimately derive from the age of empires.

We have also demonstrated that we will not bear our fair share of the cost to populations in disturbed areas. Refugees in the Mediterranean are left to die of starvation. The EU is near to abandoning the Schengen free-movement agreement and the UK has made it clear we will not accept refugees from Libya. Bombs, yes; asylum, no.

Military intervention rarely solves any of the problems described: but it sometimes seems to, and is easier for politicians (as well as often temptingly popular in the short term) than the hard grind of remedying injustice. Occasionally, intervention may stop tragic situations, like mass murder in Benghazi. But often it does more harm than good and at the very least we need to be much better at it. But can we learn?

Maybe we have to accept that people, as RAWA believes, must make their own freedoms. If we ask them how we can help, almost certainly they will tell us to put our own post-imperial house in order first. Maybe then – in humility – we might ask them what else we can do? [JC]

Website: [www.rawa.org](http://www.rawa.org)