



REFUGEE SUPPORT
GROUP DEVON

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RSG funding success

RSG have awarded another grant from the Big Lottery. This will enable us to continue with Annette Hughes's post of Project Coordinator for another two years, as well as pay essential running costs for the office and enquiry service. We have also been fortunate in securing some funds with the Allen Lane Foundation and Lloyds TSB to partner with the Big Lottery project.

John Paul Getty Junior trust is also enabling us to equip the additional office space we have with computer equipment, and we hope to have an extra PC in place and be connected to broadband imminently. But we do still need more money (especially for the emergency fund – see next page) ... So any ideas and offers to help please do get in touch!

Editors

Annette Hughes,
David Mezzetti and
Jeremy Cushing

Playtime isn't over

My name's Cassie Hague and I'm writing to introduce myself as the new Activities Co-ordinator at RSG. I started in the second week of January and am really pleased to be on board – I can't wait to get started! Since arriving I've been amazed by the energy and commitment of all of the volunteers I've come across. I know there are a lot of people I haven't met yet and I'm looking forward to working with you all and getting to know everyone.

With that in mind, we're having a Volunteer Evening on Wednesday 2nd February from 6.30 – 8.30. Look out for a letter of invitation in the next week or so! It would be great if all the RSG volunteers could come along and share ideas for activities and events we could organise in the near future. If you've been looking for a way to be involved in the Refugee Support Group and haven't yet found your niche, this could be your chance!

In the mean time (and at any time), if you've got a good idea for an activity or event you might like to help organise, ring me at the office and let's have a chat about it. [CH]

RSG management committee

Meetings are held on the first Wednesday in every month at 7pm in Wat Tyler House (see above). Everyone welcome.

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

Also in this issue

David Mezzetti on housing Exeter refugees *and* RSG's emergency fund (next page)
Devon firm rescues immigrant workers (page 3)
Victories for liberalism *and* Nimbyism in Exeter (page 4)
David Blunkett leaves office *and* health poaching (page 5)
British soldiers liable; Prague operation racist; appeals cuts; Farhat Khan (page 6)

***RSG needs
volunteers
(and a new
treasurer) –
see page 4***

HOUSING REFUGEES

David Mezzetti writes: Our sessions at HAG every Thursday (11am to 1 pm) have changed significantly in the last 6 months. With only a few asylum seekers arriving this autumn courtesy of DCC/NASS, there remain probably about 20 men in Exeter awaiting their decisions. 2004 was the last year of the DCC/NASS contract. It is likely – on current form – that only a small proportion of the remaining asylum seekers will receive positive decisions. Referrals to us for housing, therefore, will be a small trickle compared to two years ago.

Pat and I have not been idle, however, as the needs of our most recent clients have been more challenging than in the past. What do you do when somebody turns up from another city (Plymouth, Newcastle, Birmingham ...) with little but a sofa-surfing prospect? There are very, very few landlords prepared to rent on a housing benefit basis. There is – for understandable reasons – virtually no prospect of Council accommodation.

After spending a number of weeks scouring the Thursday ads in the E&E, and being a little reticent to say ‘no hope, boys’, we have concluded that for those who might have good reason not to work (e.g. the desire to make maximum use of limited time to study English), the only housing prospect is through their own networks (if they have any) or

by us trying to find family accommodation with a room to let (a friendlier context, more able to understand and accept the housing benefit route). Either that or get a job. And there *is* unskilled and semi-skilled work available beyond the chicken factory.

So we are in the process of framing an advertisement/notice for likely mags (Church newsletters, Community Outlets etc) on a regular basis asking for any homes with a room to let to a refugee. We have enough experience to ensure that such an arrangement is properly supported, to undertake the housing benefit paperwork and to help make it a positive experience for both parties.

In addition to these challenges, there is the extracomplication of helping married couples – sometimes with children – in a tight housing situation. And then there are those whose exceptional leave to remain has expired, or who have been refused appeal. How do we respond to their requests without compromising the role of RSG?

There is still much housing work that we can and are doing, and if our Thursday sessions *are* as much advice as housing sessions, it is only a response to the evolving politics of ‘asylum seeking’. RSG and all us volunteers are now working in different, and often uncharted territory. Come and join us! [DM]

RSG's emergency fund

The emergency fund has been one of the most beneficial services that we have been able to offer in this past year. Through everyone's very kind donations we have been able to help people who have not been able to secure any other support. This has meant we have helped individuals by supplying money for food, and to access legal services where they have not been obtainable locally. We are seeing increasing numbers of individuals who have had their government support terminated but are still pursuing their asylum applications. Unfortunately there are many that are homeless, and without permission to work to maintain

of income for themselves. This puts a lot of pressure on their friends to support them – often when these friends themselves are on very low incomes. The emergency fund has been able to provide food and essential living costs for some. However, the demand has been on the increase and we need to secure money to maintain this vital service.

Could you help to support an individual? If you would like to make a donation – one-off or a regular standing order, please contact us (Exeter 682185).

COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT WORKER (Ref: CDW)

Exeter Community Initiatives, a local development charity, aims to build the confidence and capacity of local communities to influence issues that affect their lives. In response to gaps in our existing services, we have worked with local partners to create an exciting new post for an experienced community development worker to support Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) communities in Exeter, particularly focusing on support for new and existing BME groups and networks.

Previous experience of working with BME communities and an understanding of issues relating to social exclusion are also essential, as are excellent communication, networking and developmental skills.

Job shares welcome. Closing date Wednesday 9th February
Call Amelia on 01392 205800 or email eileen@ecix.fsnet.co.uk

Supported by the Big Lottery Fund and Exeter Community Initiatives

Charity no 1026229

DEVON FIRM RESCUES WORKERS

The furore which accompanied the accession of ten new countries to the European Union last May has now affected Devon, with local firms looking to employ foreign workers. There has been a large but unspecified population of foreign workers in Britain for some time, of course, some of them illegal. Now people from Poland (for example) can enter the UK and work here legally. This however continues to throw up some problems.

A recent investigation by the *Guardian* exposed the extent to which employment of workers by gangmasters is spreading across the UK and also into industries other than agriculture (where it has always been common). 'Gangmasters' exist because there is a demand for a 'flexible' workforce: hence common use in crop-picking, where you need a workforce to pick the crop and not at other times. In theory they can respond to employers' needs for a temporary workforce and also to their workers' need for continuous employment, by moving workers around and negotiating with many different employers. In practice this opens up all sorts of possibilities for exploitation: some practices alleged being taking on illegal workers and faking their paperwork, paying illegally low wages, making unreasonably large deductions from wages (e.g. for accommodation), simple non-payment of wages agreed and failure to pass on tax deductions to the Inland Revenue. All this can be backed up by threats if workers protest. No-one is suggesting that all gangmasters (or suppliers of temporary labour) behave in this way (nursing supply agencies are in use by most hospitals, for example), but the system definitely has an unsavoury underside and it is very difficult for workers to secure adequate protection.

It was therefore very alarming to the long-established local meat-processing firm Lloyd Maunder, of Willand near Tiverton, when they were told that a group of Polish workers supplied to them by an agency were being housed in unsuitable and overcrowded circumstances in Exeter. The case was described by the *Guardian's* writer, Felicity Lawrence, in the 11th January issue, and she not only placed heavy emphasis on the poor conditions but also alleged exploitative practices by the agency. However Lloyd Maunder had already taken urgent action to deal with the problem. Lloyd Maunder took the workers on as direct employees (on the same terms as their regular workforce) and immediately took steps to find suitable housing for the workers. The agency's contract with Lloyd Maunder was discontinued forthwith. All 32 workers are now described as very happy. Lloyd Maunder's Personnel and Training Manager Alan Parker described their contribution to the firm as 'brilliant'. 'The Poles are conscientious, reliable and hardworking. Lloyd Maunder supply fresh food to

maintained. The company needs to operate at 100% on reliability and quality for all 365 days in the year and for this we are totally dependent on the dedication of our employees,' said Mr Parker. The firm is increasingly operating at the quality end of the market. In consequence they are delighted to be operating almost entirely with their own directly-employed workforce. 'We now only have three contract workers on site' said Recruitment Manager Heather Adwick.

The Polish workers are not, of course, refugees. Since May last year Poles can work in the UK though the UK government requires them to pay £50 for a Home Office registration. (This seems a strange arrangement since nationals of some EU countries – e.g. Poland – have to pay while others do not. Its legality may eventually be challenged.) Nevertheless RSG has always been interested in Lloyd Maunder because they have employed many of the people who sought asylum in Exeter and were later given permission to work. Currently of 1100 staff there are around 200 workers who are of non-British origin – including at the moment 20 nationalities. The firm provides English classes (by arrangement with East Devon College) partly at its own request. Many 'ethnic' workers have progressed in the firm and some are now employed in supervisory posts. Lloyd Maunder have a policy of offering all positions internally and offering promotion posts to existing staff where possible. The Personnel Department provides help with the many tortuous aspects of UK bureaucracy which workers have to deal with (Mrs Adwick has to fill in a considerable number of forms).

As Mr Parker remarks, for some years UK manufacturing has suffered from a serious shortage of assembly-line workers. Far from being flooded by immigrants from the ten new countries which joined the EU last May, UK industry – including a number of firms in the SW among other regions – is benefiting from a new supply of steady workers. Lloyd Maunder (which regularly recruits from the local East Devon population, for example through links with local schools, colleges and job centres) regards the new foreign workers as a means to keep British manufacturing firms like them in business, which enables them to maintain and generate employment for local people as well. 'Jobs are of course open to anyone who wishes to apply. The company's success is important to the local economy, including farmers, because so much of its produce is sourced locally,' said Mr Parker.

These particular Polish workers had a very happy ending. However, this is not true of all immigrant workers, in spite of the Government's enthusiasm for importing workers and UK industry's need for them. Not all firms operate in the way Lloyd Maunder does, and not all the workers who have come to the UK from the ten new EU states will have been

YESSSSS!!

A series of stunning victories for bleeding-heart liberalism has rocked the Blair government recently and gave comfort to all those who detest the drift towards populist authoritarianism and ethnic hatred which has characterised Britain in recent years, and which enables the government constantly to push the treatment of vulnerable groups, including immigrants, towards and over the edge of human rights law.

- ❑ The High Court ruled that British soldiers *are* liable under the Human Rights Act for actions in British-controlled jails in Iraq;
- ❑ The House of Lords ruled that the UK government *did* practise discrimination in processing asylum seekers in Prague;
- ❑ The House of Lords similarly overturned an Appeal Court judgement that detention in Belmarsh is legally justifiable, and
- ❑ David Blunkett got the push!

See articles below

Exeter: Nimbyism rules

In a development less to be welcomed Exeter succeeded in getting the Home Office to abandon plans to move vast hordes of refugees into Exeter, swamping the city's housing provision for decades to come (see article in last month's issue). It does seem a pity that we could not find our way to do even the little proposed (ten families) to help the world crisis of refugees.

We asked Ben Bradshaw for a comment – no reply received yet. Comments to the *Express and Echo*, which has carried considerable correspondence on the subject.

Exciting opportunities for volunteering with RSG

Would you like to join our management committee? Would you like a say in how the organisation runs? We are keen to recruit new members to the board of trustees. Please contact us if you would like to take on such a role – we would be particularly interested from applications from refugees or asylum seekers.

An opportunity has arisen for the position of TREASURER. Do you have accountancy/book keeping skills? Could you help manage the finances of RSG? Duties will include attending the monthly management committee meetings, compiling monthly finance reports, overseeing the management of our budgets.

We would also like to recruit a general book-keeping volunteer to help manage the day to day accounts for presentation to the treasurer. We anticipate this would involve just a few hours a week.

Fund-raising volunteers needed. At present we desperately need to boost our emergency fund and welcome suggestions of activities and events and volunteers to

DAVID BLUNKETT LEAVES OFFICE

One of the most illiberal Home Secretaries of our generation finally resigned on 15th December after it was revealed that his office *did* fast-track the visa application of his lover's nanny, Leoncia Kasalme. Many people have expressed sympathy, especially in Sheffield where he is much loved (quite cuddly in reality, apparently). The best comment was probably from the Howard League, one of the oldest liberal pressure groups in the country: 'David Blunkett should resign not because of some trivial issue to do with paperwork, much less his relationship with his ex-lover and his putative children, but because he is bad at his job. Since he became home secretary, 232 people have taken their own lives in prisons, including 25 women and five children. People concerned with asylum seekers will point out similar lack of concern and similar if not much higher levels of distress caused by his policies among immigrants (including the general culture of scepticism on torture exemplified in the Hany Youssef case and now in Charles Clarke's renewed proposals to deport Belmarsh internees to N African countries).

Many column inches have been written about Blunkett as a politician (and as a person), but what is most offensive to many of us is the apparent contempt for human rights and indifference to sheer human misery shown by Blunkett and those around him (and in particular his boss: see the case of Hany Youssef, discussed in the last edition), when contrasted with the unthinking arrogance of his decision to intervene to help Leoncia Kasalme, not (surely) one of the more deserving cases the immigration authorities have to deal with. Blunkett, of course, argues that he was using the Kasalme case as a stick to beat his own department with. Aside from the sheer unlikeliness of this (why use that particular case? Why not warn his officials that he was personally involved?) it underlines the massive resistance of Blairite ministers to outside criticism. Blunkett certainly shouldn't have needed an American millionairess to draw his attention to delays in processing UK immigration claims.

The other side of the argument is that Blunkett was said to be hoping that if he hammered asylum seekers hard enough he would be able to slip past the British public a more open immigration policy, which might go some way to satisfy Britain's shortage of cheap labour. It may even be that, under the ruthlessness which is why he is so valued by Blair, Blunkett might have some concern for human

rights after all, but be willing to play a long game and make sacrifices in the mean time. Such an approach is almost inescapable in immigration matters unless you are prepared to adopt a complete open frontiers approach (as some people do urge).

It may also be relevant that (apparently) the sudden announcement last year that asylum numbers would be halved (which drove asylum policy to still greater heights of abuse) was Blair's idea, not Blunkett's. So (probably) is renewed interest in the government in the idea of immigration quotas – likely to be taken up by both Tories and Lib Dems at the election, and therefore almost certain to be adopted by Labour too. The Tory version seems to be a fixed limit on the number of people allowed to enter the country (which, needless to say, will have to go together with much stricter controls at ports of entry than we have at the moment). But as Bill Morris put it, supposing you have a limit of 20,000, what do you do with the 20,001st? The Liberals' proposal is more flexible, but it seems unlikely that Blair will want Labour to seem less tough than the Tories.

In the mean time, we have to hope that Charles Clarke will eventually be more liberal than Blunkett. He will have to *talk* tough, of course (and is already doing so). Write to him at the Home Office and urge him to clean up the Blunkett act (50 Queen Anne's Gate, London SW1H 9AT). [JC]

HEALTH POACHING: NOW WE'RE THE VICTIMS

The government plans to tighten up on rules about recruiting foreign health professionals from this month. But as long predicted the US is becoming the new magnet for health professionals, and the UK, for a long time only able to maintain its health services by importing doctors and nurses trained at public expense in

countries, is now seeing record numbers moving to the US. Last year 2200 nurses went to the USA, which can offer salaries and conditions we can never match. It is estimated the US will need 1 *million* more nurses over the next decade, and they are expanding their efforts to recruit many of them from abroad.

British soldiers liable for actions in Iraq

Last September Baha Mousa, a 26-year-old hotel worker, was arrested by British troops in Basra and, with six others, was allegedly repeatedly beaten up and humiliated by soldiers of the Queen's Lancashire Regiment. The reason apparently was that they were trying to force them to reveal where their boss kept illegal weapons. This took place after the end of hostilities at a time when the British were in control of Basra. Baha Mousa died of his injuries. The government claimed that the soldiers could only be subjected to military enquiries and were immune under the criminal law and in particular under the Human Rights Act, 1998.

Six test cases were brought before the High Court. Lord Justice Rix and Mr Justice Forbes said that because Baha Mousa had been in custody at the time the Human Rights Act did apply. They decided otherwise in five other cases, however. Both sides are going to appeal.

British government's Prague immigration practice ruled racist

From July 2001 the Home Office stationed British immigration officials at Prague airport, following numerous protests in the British press about a surge in asylum claims by Czech Roma. Amid claims that the officials were given instructions to discriminate against Roma travellers (who can often be distinguished by clothing and colour of skin) a classic 'sting' operation was mounted by two Czech journalists – one dark, one 'white' – in which the white journalist was allowed to pass while her dark colleague was interrogated and refused, although they had given exactly the same information and were going to the same address in London. The Home Office was taken to court by Liberty. The High Court and the Appeal Court ruled that the operation was acceptable (which is deeply worrying) but on 9th December the House of Lords ruled it was inherently racist in that it breached the 1976 Race Relations Act, and was also contrary to the 1951 Geneva Convention on Refugees, to which Britain

APPEALS

The recent Asylum and Immigration Act inflicted a further blow on asylum seekers' hopes of securing fair treatment. In setting up the Asylum and Immigration Tribunal (AIT) the Act ruled on procedures for appealing against its decisions.

The new procedure (which will come into effect early next year) is that if an asylum seeker wishes to appeal from a decision of the AIT to the High Court, he or she has to make a case to be allowed to appeal *before* a decision is made as to whether the case merits legal aid. In other words, if you want to make your case, you have to tell your lawyers that there is no guarantee that they will be paid for their work until after they've done it. This is obviously not likely to improve your chances, and follows similar cost-cutting measures which decimated local legal advice last year. The Joint Council for the Welfare of Immigrants warns that the effect of the new rules 'may be a return to persecution for some and losing the right to bring in a family member or the right to stay for others. What is a money-saving exercise for the Department of Constitutional Affairs may just have fatal consequences for someone else'.

The new system obviously owes its origin to the concept of 'no win, no fee' recently introduced in accident claims.

Queen invites failed asylum seeker

Early last month the Queen invited a Pakistani asylum seeker to a Buckingham Palace garden party as someone who has performed exceptional services to the community. The Home Office, on the other hand, are trying to deport her.

Farhat Khan is a Pakistani woman who came to England in 2000 to escape her family. She was being physically abused by her husband, and her two small daughters (then 6 and 8 years old) were to be betrothed to local men in their 20s. In Pakistan Ms Khan worked for the British Council on schemes to improve women's education (which was one reason for trouble with her family). In England she was at first given a work permit, but later, when she applied for asylum, she worked as an unpaid volunteer. Because of her professional skills she is an immensely valuable worker with the Punjabi community in Manchester.

The Home Office want to deport her because her husband was for a time in Canada. He has since returned to Pakistan. The Home Office also propose to deport Mrs Khan's two daughters. A petition has been organised in Manchester to try to persuade the immigration minister, Des Browne, to rescind the deportation orders.

Information from Amanda Ramsay, 020 7219 6055