

# News from the Refugee Support Group Devon

April 2005



## REFUGEE SUPPORT GROUP DEVON

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### Editors

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### RSG

### management committee

Meetings are usually held on the first Wednesday in every month at 7pm in Wat Tyler House. 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, please.

## sAl-e-nAo mubarak!'

### or 'Happy New Year!'

March 21 brought a new year to our Afghan and Iranian friends so it was appropriate to come together and celebrate, which we did on Sunday 20 March at St Sidwell's Community Centre.

A veritable feast was enjoyed by everyone who attended and all thanks go to Karim, whose enthusiasm and determination ensured the party took place. True, it was a bit of a last minute affair - the premises had been booked but the other planning, inviting, shopping, preparing and cooking was beginning to look too much to cope with in the time available. But where there's a will.....the menu was organised, lists were written, Karim, Nuzhat and Kate really did shop till they dropped and everything was transported to St Sidwell's in good time to get everything ready. Karim, magnificent in his white chef's outfit, and ably assisted by Nuzhat, Kate and Madeleine, who peeled, sliced, chopped, grated, stirred..., produced mountains of delicious food.

It was good to meet up with people we hadn't seen for a long time and hopefully the party was a good start to a prosperous year for all.

### In this issue

**New Year Party and Refugee Week: help needed** (next page)

**NASS blamed over expulsions** (page 3)

**Devon racism and Zimbabwe: safe to return to** (page 4)

**Devon Law Centre job** (page 5)

**Abuse of detainees** (page 6) (note: beware of strong language, if it upsets you)

گروه حمایت از پناهندگان  
داوطلب می پذیرد □

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این گروه پناهندگان از ملیتهای  
□ وابستگان و مختلف

آنها را حمایت می نماید

\*\*\*

برای اطلاعات بیشتر با ما تماس

حاصل نمائید

\*\*\*

آدرس، شماره تلفن و ایمیل ما  
در بالای این صفحه ذکر شده  
□ است



**RSG members impressively in action on the Bristol Bowling Trip (after a hearty pub lunch).**

A great day out on March 18<sup>th</sup> provided the opportunity for friends to meet up again following the recent relocation.

Well done to Adam and co. for organising this.

# REFUGEE WEEK: PLEASE HELP

Plans are under way for this year's Refugee Week celebrations, which will be on 20<sup>th</sup> – 26<sup>th</sup> June.

As last year, we are planning some events on the Quay on the Saturday, as well as a series of displays and exhibitions throughout the week. Much of our efforts last year were concentrated in Exeter, but for this year we would like to raise awareness throughout Devon. As many of our volunteers live outside Exeter City we are seeking help to find display space and help to co-ordinate this.

So if you live outside Exeter, would like to raise the profile of asylum seekers and refugees and could find a prominent place to

display materials please do get in touch with us (see front page for address).

We shall also be seeking volunteers to staff displays in Exeter, help with coffee morning, and assist with activities on the Quay – please keep in touch with us for further information and if possible attend the next volunteer meeting we plan to hold in May.

## *New RSG activity co-ordinator*

We had tough competition in the recruitment process for our activity co-ordinator, but following a suc-

cessful interview the post has been offered to Adam Welton.

Adam has been volunteering with RSG for the last six months and thinks he knows what he's let himself in for!! We very much look forward to Adam starting the post in the next few weeks, and I'm sure he'll be getting in touch with many of you to look at ways to move the project forward.

Adam has already been helping with activities and went on the latest trip to Bristol when we all went bowling (see photo on front page). It was a lively trip full of difficult navigation and with at least one brush with the police (successfully placated, however).

# *NASS blamed over Devon's expulsion of asylum seekers*

Officials in charge of Devon's former asylum seekers project have responded to criticisms of their role in allowing the re-dispersal of Exeter asylum seekers to Bristol (reported in last month's issue) as follows:

## **Chronology of events**

In March 2004 the last asylum seekers that we supported arrived in Devon. In May 2004 we agreed to terminate the contract with NASS [the Home Office's National Asylum Seekers Service] and in June I wrote to NASS confirming this and requesting immediate meetings to agree how we would, in a well managed way, close down the scheme. We had plenty of time – everyone is supposed to get a decision in 6 months, our accommodation contracts were not due for renewal until now etc.

From then till December despite numerous reminders NASS failed to respond. This is one of many characteristics of NASS which make them just about impossible to work with.

In December their new Commercial director met me and instead of having a sensible conversation threatened to sue us and seek compensation. This was clearly a ridiculous position to take, but describes their lack of understanding or willingness to talk sensibly. In January they clearly realised this and withdrew their threat and agreed to offer our remaining asylum seekers (20) the option of a move to Bristol. They took over this process, met with all individuals then wrote to them telling them where and when this would all happen. As in our past experience of working with NASS we had to chase them for a copy of the letter so that we knew what was happening, as we had many things we had

## HOME OFFICE: NASS IS AWARE THAT THE NEED TO MOVE ASYLUM SEEKERS IS DISTRESSING

The Home Office has commented on the re-dispersal as follows:

The NASS had a contract with Devon County Council to provide accommodation for asylum seekers. Devon County Council chose to withdraw from the contract and NASS gave its agreement to this. Unfortunately NASS does not have other providers providing accommodation in the area. In the circumstances there was no option but to move the asylum seekers housed in accommodation provided by Devon County Council to alternative accommodation and that is now being done. NASS is aware that the need to move asylum seekers is distressing for those involved and has taken all reasonable steps to ensure the moves are handled sensitively. The Service is also very grateful for the work done by support groups in the area to assist asylum seekers while they have been living in Exeter.

to do (move people's Post Office for getting money from here to there etc).

### **Comment**

This position was reached through the incompetence of NASS and the whole immigration system:

- People should have had decisions long before now;
- NASS should have talked to us in June.

The difficulties for us were in negotiating with an organisation who wouldn't talk and then, when they did, threatened court action; and that by January we were in real danger of having more asylum seekers than accommodation. Our contracts with landlords were coming to an end and they were understandably unwilling to renew when they knew that we could not offer them long-term deals.

This experience of working with NASS is, as I say, symptomatic of their multiple

failures ... We did not want the eventuality of people having to move. We did all we could to avoid it.

The move involved 20 people: about 10 were happy to go (already had links in that area etc); about 7 were resigned to going; about 3 were very unhappy. 2 of the 20 have chosen to stay on a 'subs only' basis ...

This is a sad end to a very positive project. We wanted to manage its ending in the same well co-ordinated way as we had managed the rest of the project. Unfortunately NASS weren't up to that particular job. We have had feedback since the move. Most people are getting on well and are pleased to be in Bristol. The major problem has been that NASS has failed to sort out people's money and that the person responsible is on leave! We will pursue that too.

*RSG trip to Bristol – see front page*

# South West second worst on racial attacks

A survey in the *Observer* (27<sup>th</sup> March) claims that Devon and Cornwall are second worst in Britain for racial attacks, and that the number of such attacks has been increasing. As RSG has

long argued, this seems to be partly due to repeated 'dog-whistle' comments by politicians which, while claimed not to be racist, actually have the effect of raising racial tensions.

## ZIMBABWE: SAFE TO RETURN TO

The recent parliamentary election in Zimbabwe seems to have left the opposition Movement for Democratic Change (MDC) demoralised and adrift, while the ruling party, Zanu PF, under Robert Mugabe, is triumphant. Mugabe claims that he intends to stay in office until he is a hundred, and the size of his parliamentary majority means that he will be able to change the country's constitution to make that possible, as well as with the aim of making the MDC even more powerless.

There is a strong historical connection between Zimbabwe (formerly Southern Rhodesia) and Britain. In 1980 the former British colony achieved independence after years of civil war. As part of the agreement Britain promised to help finance land reform aimed at buying out white settlers, who farmed far more than their share (if indeed they could be said to have a share, in view of the fact that the land was taken by force). This promise was not kept.

The new regime was scarred by a vicious quarrel between the two parties which had fought for independence – ZANU PF and ZAPU. Over a five-year period which amounted to a new civil war many ZAPU activists were massacred. In other ways, however, the new state was a model, with high levels of education and a prosperous agriculture. Recently it has experienced more and more political and economic difficulties and this means that many Zimbabweans have fled to the UK. In 1996 they made up less than one-tenth of one per cent of people seeking asylum here. In 2002 Mugabe won a presidential election amid widespread accusations of systematic violence against supporters of the MDC (which had replaced ZAPU as the main opposition). The proportion of Zimbabweans among asylum seekers increased to 3%. The following year, it increased to over 9%, at a time when the number of asylum seekers overall was itself at an all-time high.

In 2002 the Home Office responded to the acknowledged political strife in Zimbabwe by officially suspending the return of failed asylum seekers there on the grounds that the country was not safe. This is a very unusual step. At the moment there is no country in the world to which the Home Office formally refuses to return failed asylum seekers; in fact refugee organisations believe that there is an unacknowledged policy of making returns simply in order to keep the government's options open, as it were.

In order to do this, of course, the government has to prove either that the regime in question is really benign or that the individual being returned is not really in danger. Amnesty International, in its report 'Get it Right', listed many of the ways in which this is done. These include over-simplifying the political situation so that an individual can be returned on the grounds of claiming to belong to an endangered group which the Home Office denies the existence of; downplaying or querying the truth of atrocities; and quoting statements by government figures at face value.

All these techniques can be seen in the Home Office's reports on Zimbabwe. Examples are given by the Association of Visitors to Immigration Detainees (AVID) include the Home Office's obsession with Zimbabwe's tribal structure as though this was the main driver to political instability; its use of words like 'accused of' when dealing with proven atrocities by supporters of the regime; and quoting with approval Mugabe's public apology for some of the best-publicised abuses as evidence that potential victims were no longer in danger. Actually Mugabe is – with some success – presenting himself to African opinion as a democratic leader, and needs to make such statements. There is no evidence (and no plausible likelihood) that he means them. In addition there is the unpleasant possibility that British policy was driven by race. One of Mugabe's more desperate policies has been to seize the farms of white settlers and reallocate them to black farmers. This created political pressure even from the Conservative Party in Britain to allow asylum, because the problem was perceived (wrongly) as mainly the oppression of a white minority by a black government. Subsequently the atmosphere changed and (predictably) in November 2004 David Blunkett resumed forced deportations on the grounds that the previous suspension 'has been exploited'. He quoted a high level of refusals. What he did not quote was a correspondingly high level of successful appeals. Meanwhile Labour's success in preventing people seeking asylum (which in the case of Zimbabwe involved requiring Zimbabweans wishing to travel to the UK to obtain a visa) has cured the problem as far as we are concerned. The government is well aware that Zimbabwe continues to be unsafe for many of its citizens. However the outcry over white farmers has declined and most white Zimbabweans are actually fairly safe, so the government obviously feels it can ignore the problem.

[JC]

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is looking for an

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Tel: 01752 519794***

# ABUSE OF DETAINEES

## CANCER OF BRITISH ASYLUM SYSTEM

Recently the BBC ran a documentary about an undercover operation in Britain's immigration detention and removal system. The film (like its predecessor, 'Secret Policeman') uncovered drearily predictable evidence of systemic abuses, lax controls, understaffing and complacency.

There are about 2000 people 'detained' on immigration grounds in Britain at present (with plans to increase this number by 50%). Some of these are people who have claimed asylum and whose claims are under investigation by the Home Office. Others are criminals awaiting deportation; failed asylum seekers; or people who have failed to return to their home countries when they were required to ('overstayers'). About 500 are in prisons, the rest being in 'removal centres' like Yarlswood (damaged by fire in February 2002) or Oakington in Cambridgeshire. The government plans to end the use of prisons, but has not yet been able to do so.

The BBC film was made in Oakington, which is run by Global Solutions Limited (through Group 4) and the national 'escort service', also run by GSL. It found that staff were given training which explicitly included awareness of the nature of racial incidents (defined as any incident which any participant or bystander perceives as racially motivated) as well as other vital matters such as control and restraint (C&R). Trainees were told that 'GSL is committed to tackling institutional discrimination'.

In spite of the training, and corporate good intentions, the undercover reporters documented instances of racially-motivated behaviour, breach of regulations and brutality of one kind or another so numerous as to count as systemic. By no means all staff were complicit, but many who disapproved felt helpless: 'It's unreal, absolutely unreal. We do illegal things every day. I mean, come on. Staff get away with blue murder'. Some

staff reacted by becoming apathetic and merely going through the motions. 'I think I've got one Chinese and one Rumanian in the back of the van, but I can't be arsed to look.'

However there was a vociferous minority (as in 'Secret Policeman') who made their prejudices obvious. 'What good are these fuckers for society? They're not even good in their own society. That's why they come here – to get it all for free. Their own country don't give 'em fuck all cos they deserve fuck all. But we give them everything.' In many cases the dislike was ethnic – 'thieving gypsy bastard', 'coon', 'Jap-slapping' and so on. There was a culture of avoiding regulations, in actuality as well as in spirit: 'All that's just to cover arse, innit? But never hit them, or you'll have David Blunkett and his fucking dog on your nuts'. 'Just take him in the back room and smack him. He'll come nicely then. As long as you can't see any cameras. Lifts are good. Lifts are very good – no cameras.'

The causes of all this were not always evident, but it seems likely that one was understaffing (the rule that you have to have three staff to practise safe C&R was widely disregarded). Most of the system is run for private profit, and there is some evidence that financial profit from a successful deportation is a factor. Another obvious factor was that dealing with people who are desperate is actually very hard and dangerous work. Inmates can be difficult (and sometimes violent) and they can be just as abusive of staff as staff are of them. In such circumstances to create an atmosphere of professionalism, patience and understanding must be extremely difficult. It also seems likely that as children's homes attract paedophiles such places as detention centres must be attractive to racists. Weeding them out must be very difficult, even if we accept that a genuine attempt to do so is made by the organisations running the system.

### Use of unlawful force

The evidence of the film suggests that

this is usually successfully concealed. However the system of immigration visitors has uncovered a significant number of cases. A report by the National Coalition of Anti-Deportation Campaigns (NCADC) lists 35 cases taken up by solicitors of assaults against detainees in the system, mainly taking place while they were in the charge of the escort system: twenty of them at Heathrow Airport (presumably staff failed to notice the cameras). NCADC estimate that immigration visitors only see 10% of detainees and suggest, therefore, that 'visitors only get to see the tip of the iceberg'. It is also very difficult to pursue complaints: the organisations involved have few funds, legal aid is drying up, medical evidence is often too expensive or impractical to obtain. And, of course, in many cases the victim is out of the country. For these or other reasons the police declined to pursue 65% of cases reported to them.

### What to do?

As politicians constantly remind us there is nothing improper about removing people who have no legal right to be here. It seems quite reasonable to argue that some forcible detention will need to be part of the process. But why is the system going so badly wrong?

The trouble is, it might be easier to ask, why should it go right? So many factors are stacked up against it – endemic racism, dog-whistle politics, anti-immigrant mythology (encouraged by the politicians), cost-cutting by the corporations mainly controlling the system. The best solution would probably be to abandon the whole system and accept whatever consequences that created. If that (as seems likely) is politically impossible, we are left with a need for much greater public funding – the system would need much higher levels of staffing, resourcing, training and inspection – and a never-ending painting-the-Forth-Bridge operation by those who care about immigrants. It doesn't seem likely that immigration visitors will be out of a job any time soon. [JC]