



REFUGEE SUPPORT
GROUP DEVON

Wat Tyler House
King William St
Exeter EX4 6PD

Telephone.:
01392-682 185

Email:
info@rsgdevon.org.uk

Reg. charity no 1092410

RSG at the seaside

On Saturday the 14th May some of RSG's finest members braved the terrible weather and set out to Paignton Zoo. This was a superb and well attended outing with young and old having a great time together. At the zoo highlights included the gorilla hut and the reptile house – both of which were undercover funnily enough.

After a few hours of splashing around and darting from animal to animal we reboarded the bus and Jeremy carefully navigated our way to the pier for chips. A big thank you to Jeremy C for driving the minibus and the Activities Committee who helped organise the day; also to John Vincent and his partner who drove out to Crealy Adventure Park with a family of our members. Another great day out by all accounts. Thank you! This would not have been possible without you. [AW]



Navid Dad attempts to hypnotise a python at Paignton Zoo



Adam Welton gloomily surveys all the food we couldn't afford to buy on Paignton Pier. (We ate chips.)

Jeremy Cushing writes: it was a cold and very wet, pelted down all day. There were a few brave spirits on the beach (mostly in expensive wet suits). We went to the zoo and saw giant snakes and gorillas, then went on the Pier and ate traditional British chips. Everyone should get a certificate from David Blunkett.

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Editors

Annette Hughes,
David Mezzetti and
Jeremy Cushing

RSG management committee

Meetings are usually 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, please.

ت ازى گروه حما
ي پناهندگان داوطلب م
ردى پند

ان ازن گروه پناهندگى
وابستگان ىتهاى مل
ومختلف

دى نما ىت مى آنها را حما

شترى اطلاعات ب ىبرا
با ما تماس

New moves at RSG

From the RSG office, William Gallois describes new developments in the work of RSG.

Since the enforced removal of many of Exeter's asylum seekers to Bristol, there has been something of a change in the routine of volunteering in the office. We still see plenty of asylum seekers, but recently more refugees have been using the service, often presenting cases which are different in character to the kinds of issues faced by asylum seekers. RSG has always served the needs of refugees in Exeter, but as an organisation it perhaps now has more time to deal with their specific needs.

For example, a number of refugees who had not previously had much contact with RSG and who had lived in Exeter for years, are now using RSG as a base from which to put applications together to study at university. In many ways, helping refugees to access such services is a very posi-

tive experience, for the great majority of people I have dealt with thus far in universities have been enthusiastic about the idea of supporting applications from refugees. At times, this can be somewhat complicated by some institutions not having clear guidelines on how to treat refugee candidates, but some institutions (such as the NHS which awards bursaries for nursing students) have clear and enlightened policies. The same is also true of the LEA, which has an open-minded attitude towards funding refugees' studies in higher education.

Another factor emerging in the cases of some refugees coming to the office is the great complexity of their cases. Whereas asylum seekers tend to be locked into systems and organisations with whom RSG

can negotiate, refugees, especially those coming from other parts of the UK, may need to establish connections with very large numbers of agencies and organisations.

In the case of both refugees who want to further their education and those who need to start from scratch in Exeter, RSG as an organisation is learning a great deal and I'm sure it would be useful for all those connected with RSG to let Annette know of skills or connections they have which might be of especial use to refugees. We could build up a more comprehensive register of fields in which RSG volunteers work, and of those who might be able to mentor refugees. The variety of fields in which users now expect RSG to have some knowledge is colossal. [WG]

Preparing for Refugee Week

Yes, it's that time of the year again, and at RSG (not to mention other agencies) organisers are scurrying around preparing for the range of events put on during Refugee Week, this year planned for the fourth week in June (see programme, right).

In addition to planned events there will be displays in various locations around Exeter, including St Stephen's Church, Exeter Library (wall cases), the foyer of the Picture House and the foyer/common room of the Institute for Arab and Islamic Studies (all week) and (on Saturday only) the Guildhall Shopping Centre and the Quay. Other sites may include other local libraries, Exeter College and colleges outside Exeter.

EXETER REFUGEE WEEK

Amnesty International Oxfam
Refugee Support Group Devon STAR
Programme of Events

Tuesday 21st June

Showing of "Turtles Can Fly" at Picture House

Wednesday 22nd June

Showing of "Turtles Can Fly" at Picture House

Thursday 23rd June

Showing of "Turtles Can Fly" at Picture House

Friday 24th June

Coffee morning in St Stephen's Church

Attended by the Mayor/Deputy Mayor and with presentations from Oxfam, Amnesty International and Refugee Support Group Devon. With a chance to try desserts from Afghanistan and Iran and to pick up educational literature about refugees.

Drama Event at the Phoenix

Drama Event at the dance studio in the Phoenix. Details to be confirmed.

Saturday 25th June

Event at the quay:

To include kite-making, music and the possibility of free samples of tasty traditional treats.

Multi-faith service. Midday at Friends' Meeting House

A mini 5-a-side tournament involving teams of refugees and people working with refugees (to be confirmed).

Home office typo imposes terror orders

The Home Office has admitted that an administrative error caused all ten of the men detained under Part 4 of the Anti-terrorism, Crime and Security Act to be recorded as having belonged to 'a network of north African extremists directly involved in terrorist planning in the UK, including the use of toxic chemicals'. This is, of course, a reference to the Kamel Bourgass trial (see page 5). The Home Office says that 'there was an error in the drafting of the control orders issued in the respect of the 10 individuals ... The orders, as drafted, used the same wording on all ten when in fact this wording applied to only one of the cases'.

One wonders what kind of administrative error it was. Probably over-zealous use of the cut and paste facility in Microsoft Word. Civil servants have been made aware of public indignation at excessive spending on officials and are trying to economise on time. The Home Office helpfully adds that 'this was an administrative error which does not affect the validity of the certificates' – in other words, they would have been banged up anyway, so no need to worry about precisely why.

It would be difficult to take seriously the level of blithe incompetence that this reveals, except that the secrecy with which the government is determined to surround detention orders seems certain to conceal any such errors in the future from the people accused. The whole thrust of the government's proposed legislation is that the ac-

cused are not allowed to know what they are accused of, or what the evidence is against them. Not only do we not know how many other errors the Home Office has perpetrated, we will probably not be allowed to find out. The mind boggles at what will happen when the Home Office is put in charge of the new national citizen database planned to underpin the new identity cards.

Tory asylum claim

In an election leaflet, Dan Thomas, a failed Conservative candidate for Exeter City Council, said that if people voted for him he would 'stop putting Exeter's asylum seekers in the Southgate Hotel and propose that a secure centre be found'. On the face of it this is a typical piece of dog-whistle politics: public money is being wasted on asylum seekers and they are so dangerous that they need to be locked up.

A spokesman for the hotel said that although they occasionally accommodated people for both Exeter City Council housing department and Devon County Council they had no way of knowing what the status of such people was. 'We do get bookings, but we don't query them.' There had been previous rows about Exeter using the hotel for homeless families (locals, not asylum seekers). Devon County Council's Asylum Seeker Protection Unit no longer operates but a spokesman had no knowledge of any asylum seekers being put in this or any other hotel. 'We used rented prop-

IMMIGRANT SCROUNGERS FLOOD INTO UK

Since EU enlargement last May 100,000 Poles have registered to work in this country. Fully 30 of them (0.003%) are on benefits. What part of 'send them back' don't you understand, Mr Blair?

erties we managed ourselves' he commented.

Dan Thomas has not responded to several calls to his 'action line' requesting clarification. Exeter Conservative Association agent, Barry Thorpe, is similarly not replying to calls. The successful candidate for Dan Thomas's ward, Lib Dem Sheila Hobden, comments: 'I'm afraid the Tory candidate in Duryard and Pennsylvania put out some pretty scurrilous literature. On several occasions it was completely untrue and based on the politics of fear and misinformation. I did not actually see this particular leaflet but it sounds like par for the course as far as he was concerned. Comments like this add to the already highly prejudiced negative picture painted by the media on the subjects of asylum refugees and immigration generally'.

As the Tories are not responding we have no way of finding out what, if any, justification they had for suggesting that asylum seekers are a security risk.

Devon and Cornwall rated second worst for racial attacks

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

Devon has a small black and minority ethnic population ('BME', which incidentally includes Irish). In the 2001 census 96.98% of the population are classed as 'white British', which obviously leaves 3.02% (one in 33) as the BME population. This is divided into sixteen categories, all of which have some representation in Devon. Importantly, the BME population does not live only in Devon's big towns. In districts described as 'rural' the BME proportion is 2.6%. There is no electoral ward (the smallest unit) which does not have some ethnic diversity.

According to the *Observer* survey, this is a situation which puts ethnic minorities at greater risk. Although cities tend to record higher levels of racial attacks, this is because they have higher proportions of BME citizens. If you record racial attacks (and harassment) *in proportion to the population*, rural areas have a worse record. This puts Devon's widely scattered, small pockets of BME people at particular risk and helps to make the south west one of the worst regions in the UK.

Devon and Cornwall Police have a strategy for dealing with this. Each of its four divisions (Basic Command Units, or BCUs) has a sergeant and a support officer responsible for diversity issues. Plymouth, with its much bigger BME population, also has a neighbourhood beat officer for asylum seekers. (Attempts to create such a post for Exeter have so far been unsuccessful.)

The problem with this is, of course, that in order to deal effectively with what is an extremely difficult problem you need to know what happens on the ground. Devon and Cornwall Police support the 'True Vision' project, which aims at increasing the likelihood that people will report incidents of racial violence or harassment. However, as with many forms of crime, attempts by the police to encourage people to come forward, if they succeed,

make the force look bad, because the statistics of recorded crime go up. This may be behind the statistics recorded by the *Observer*, which suggest that the situation in the south west is getting worse. At best such statistics are of doubtful value: whereas better information for the police is not.

Devon County Council is also well aware of the problem of race hate in Devon. A statement says that DCC are 'becoming increasingly aware, through work with partners and communities, of the extent of racism and racial attacks in Devon and of the damaging effects on the lives of individuals and their families. The geography of Devon makes the provision of adequate support services more challenging than it would be in urban areas and can increase the sense of isolation that individuals feel'. DCC has for some time been working with the Monitoring Group, which aims to help victims through a racial harassment and violence action network (RAVAN). DCC has also recently appointed a full-time corporate equality officer (Jo Hooper).

The nature of the problem

Racist offences can be committed against British white citizens as well as BME individuals, but the British Crime Survey reports that black and Asian individuals (not quite the same as BME) are three or four times as likely to be victims of race crime as white British.

Racist offences vary widely in type. The Devon and Cornwall Police website lists violence but also verbal abuse, offensive mail and damage to property. They also have a catch-all category: 'any other form of racial harassment'. A survey by the Devon and Exeter Racial Equality Council, carried out in between 2000 and 2003 and applying specifically to rural areas, identified a very wide range of racial harassment endured by BME citizens (including Travellers). It also identified numerous problems including people's

How to report a racial incident

'Racial' is interpreted as any incident which *any participant or bystander perceives as racial*. If you are involved, or a bystander, the fact that you personally believed there was an element of racial motivation will be accepted.

You can ring the police on 999 if the incident is ongoing and serious. Otherwise ring the general number for Devon and Cornwall Police (08452 777 444).

If you are not confident of your English tell the operator what language you speak and you will be connected to an interpreter. This service operates 24 hours a day, seven days a week.

You can also make an anonymous complaint by ringing 0800 555 111.

The True Vision project

You can download a self-report form from www.report-it.org.uk.

Devon REC

For advice and support anywhere in Devon contact the Devon and Exeter Racial Equality Council on 01392 422566 or devonrec@devonrec.org.uk.

reluctance to report incidents and (sometimes) ineffective or even hostile intervention by the authorities. It is to be hoped that numerous current initiatives will change this, but the statistics (as far as they go) are not encouraging. One major trend is towards a 'victim-centred' approach, avoiding what was often a concentration on the perpetrators rather than on victims' experience. This seems likely to have benefits. On the other hand, as the *Observer* article commented, it is paralleled by a refusal to see perpetrators as in any need of help. We are all racists to some extent, and should not forget it. [JC]

THE RICIN FIASCO

Last month we were finally told what lay behind the ominous statements about terrorist dangers which had been made from time to time by political and police figures. They turned out to be derived from the secret trial of nine Algerians on terrorist charges, including planning to use ricin as a weapon of mass destruction. During the trial British political leaders used associated evidence to claim that Al Qaeda had planned a major terror offensive in Europe, and Colin Powell used it in a speech to the UN aimed at justifying war against Iraq. All except one of the prosecutions have now collapsed (and the only successful one is now being appealed). This affair has shown our leaders using dodgy information in almost exactly the same way as dodgy intelligence was used in Britain to justify the war in Iraq. What war are we being drawn into this time?

One person was convicted in the trial: an Algerian, Kamel Bourgass. He had previously been convicted of murdering a Manchester police officer, Stephen Oake, in an incident which was only accidentally connected with the ricin affair. Subsequently he was also put on trial for attempted murder when police found recipes in a flat he had been living in for the production of various poisons including ricin. (It was initially thought that ricin had been found, but eventually this turned out to be a mistake.) Eight others were charged at the same time. The judge put a block on publicity, so for the many weeks the trial went on we had nothing except dark hints from David Blunkett to indicate that a terror trial was in progress.

The poison

Ricin is nasty stuff, 6000 times as poisonous as cyanide, and has no effective antidote. It is made by fairly easy processes from castor oil beans, which are legally on sale (e.g. as ingredients for industrial oils). It was first famous when Soviet secret agents attacked two Bulgarian dissidents, Georgi Markov and Vladimir Kostov, in London in 1978. Markov died. Traces of it were found in caves in Afghanistan, and we know Al Qaeda has shown interest.

However it is not much use as a weapon of mass destruction, mainly because it is very unlikely to harm you unless you get it into you in some way: death is most likely if ricin is injected (as it was in the Markov case), much less likely if you swallow it or inhale ricin dust. You have to imagine evil terrorists wandering over the battlefield injecting people. The method that Bourgass was planning to use (smearing ricin cream on door handles) would not have worked (though his victims might have swallowed ricin from their hands). The

lethal dose if swallowed for an average RSG member would be 2½ milligrams. Bourgass's recipe was for less than that (in fact just enough to make up one lethal injection), and Porton Down scientists report that it would have destroyed 90% of the ricin in the beans used.

The plotter

Kamel Bourgass (31) was the only person convicted in the 'ricin trial'. His first conviction, for murdering Stephen Oake and attempting to murder three of his colleagues, led to a sentence of minimum 22 years in prison. His subsequent trial was based on a period when he lived in a flat in Wood Green and studied methods of making poisons.

He was described by one of the other defendants as a loner and very secretive, who spent hours obsessively reading the Koran. In court he claimed (plausibly) to have been terrified of being sent back to Algeria (or of his family there being targeted). A senior Manchester detective described him as 'an incredibly dangerous individual' (probably because they failed to give their officers effective protection) but he also sounds very disturbed and probably the reaction of Stephen Oake's family (which is to pray for him) is appropriate. Simon Jenkins in *The Times* described him as 'the miserable detritus of a North African dictatorship'

The trial

The charge in the second trial, of attempted murder, was also made against a number of associates. It was based on the evidence found in the Wood Green flat where he lived for some time and in which various chemicals were found along with handwritten recipes for making poisons. The prosecution tried to connect him with Al Qaeda on the basis of statements made in Algeria by another man, Muhammad Meguerba, who had also been in Britain up to 2002, when he was arrested, discovered

to have false documents and fled the country. Meguerba's statements claimed that he and Bourgass had both been trained in Afghanistan terror camps and that Bourgass had been making a colourless fluid which would be lethal in contact with skin. Meguerba claimed that the training in Afghanistan took place in the late summer of 2002. The US attack on Afghanistan (during which camps were bombed and the Al Qaeda network particularly targeted) started on 7th October 2001, so this story is unlikely. As to the clear fluid, Meguerba said it was stored in two Nivea Cream bottles. These were found but had no trace of ricin.

The jury refused to convict Bourgass and his associates on the attempted murder charge. The prosecution were only able to secure a conviction for 'conspiracy to commit a public nuisance', and even this charge only for Bourgass. Charges against all the other defendants failed. The trial (costing over £20m) was thus a humiliating flop.

The torturers

Algeria: The key evidence in the trial was from Muhammad Meguerba, who gave evidence in Algeria after having been questioned by the Algerian police. British investigators were not allowed to question him except in their presence, let alone bring him to London to give evidence in the Bourgass trial; nor were they allowed to ask any follow up questions to those they had previously notified to the Algerians. Algeria is a military dictatorship engaged in a civil war with Muslim opponents. Human Rights Watch says that people arrested in Algeria 'continue to be at risk of torture or ill-treatment'. It is thus very likely that he was tortured; and it is known that the Algerians are anxious to provide Britain (and also the USA) with useful intelligence in return for our help in their own war on terror.

The USA: Colin Powell refers in his speech to a 'detainee' (known as Abu-watia) whose evidence was the basis of the claim that the notorious terrorist leader Musab Al-Zarqawi had ordered the 'ricin plot'. It is now well known that the US has practised various forms of torture on detainees in its own facilities, and that they transfer hard cases to countries where even more extreme methods can be used on them.

The UK: Britain is not known to use torture, but does use evidence acquired by torture, as happened in this case. Such evidence is notoriously unreliable (but in this case, politically very convenient).

The liars

Colin Powell: Claimed in a speech to the UN in February 2003 that the ricin plot was part of a larger conspiracy ordered by Musab Al-Zarqawi from Iraq. The US was desperate to connect Iraq to Al-Qaeda, of course. Regardless of what he may be up to nowadays, at that time Al-Zarqawi was only connected to Iraq by being associated with Ansar al-Islam, a Kurdish anti-Saddam rebel group. He is not (even the US Army now admits) connected with Al-Qaeda. No evidence in any case has been produced that the Wood Green plot was ordered by anyone, or that it had any European links.

Scotland Yard: The Scotland Yard anti-terror chief Peter Clarke refers to a 'real and deadly threat' and says that 'the impact on the public, if [Bourgass] had succeeded in what he wanted to do is incalculable'. More recently (and, during an election, unforgivably) another Met officer, Ian Blair, argued that the case justified the (multi-billion pound) introduction of ID cards. Both these statements are (to say the least) extremely questionable. Some would say they are absurd. Police characteristically demand increases in their powers, and it would seem any excuse will do.

The BBC: 'Now at last [with the end of the trial] the legal gag preventing the police from explaining the [ricin plot] threat has been lifted.' This is, of course, almost exactly the converse of the truth, which is that the judge's prohibition of reporting enabled commentators to go on ignoring evidence that the original hyped-up accusations were mostly unfounded.

David Blunkett: 'Al-Qaeda is seen to be and will be demonstrated through our courts to be actually on our doorstep and threatening our lives'. These remarks were made during the trial and the judge complained to the Attorney General about them. They risked a perversion of justice (which from any Home Secretary but David Blunkett would provoke astonishment). They also actually contradicted information which Blunkett must have had at the time, which was that the prosecution had already abandoned any claim that Al Qaeda was involved, and that Porton Down had found no trace of ricin in Wood Green. For Blunkett, political considerations seem to have outweighed both truth and justice.

The press: Produced a positive festival of lies and distortion. The *Mail* claimed that 'the fanatic [Bourgass] was able to come and go without hindrance'. The *Sun* said that 'like some 250,000 others, Bourgass found it easy to live here illegally as he plotted a ricin attack'. Apart from the 250,000 figure, which no-one can confirm, and the implication that all the others are probably planning ricin attacks too, it is simply not true that Bourgass 'found it easy'. The police were able to arrest Me-guerba and were actively looking for Bourgass; ten men were arrested during the course of this case. It is possible to criticise some aspects of the operation but to call it 'pitiful impotence' (the *Mail*) or say that 'border controls are a sick joke' (the *Sun*) is exaggeration if not deliberate distortion for political motives. The motives of the BBC (which also disgraced itself) are less clear, but even more worrying.

The implications

It will probably never be possible to unravel, in the public mind, all the web of distortion and lies which has accumulated round this case. The major conclusion is probably that the political establishment, for its own ends, is determined to drive the public into panic about the terrorist threat. We have for some time been subjected to portentous announcements by politicians and senior policemen on the lines of 'we can't tell you the details, but we urge you to believe that the terrorist threat is so serious that if we did, it would curdle your blood'. This is then used to justify locking people up without telling them what they are supposed to have done, setting up giant computer systems to keep track of us all, loosening controls over the police or what-have-you. No-one has dealt with this line of

better than Lord Justice Hoffman in the judgement which caused the collapse of the government's policy of unlawfully locking up suspects last year. It is worth quoting him at length:

'The Home Secretary has adduced evidence, both open and secret, to show the existence of a threat of serious terrorist outrages. ... Despite the widespread scepticism which has attached to intelligence assessments since the fiasco over Iraqi weapons of mass destruction, I am willing to accept that credible evidence of such plots exist. ... [It is] entirely likely that the threat of ... atrocities in the UK is a real one. But the question is whether such a threat is *a threat to the life of the nation*. [RSG italics] ... This is a nation which has been tested in adversity, which has survived physical destruction and catastrophic loss of life. I do not underestimate the ability of fanatical groups of terrorists to kill and destroy, but they do not threaten the life of the nation. Whether we would survive Hitler hung in the balance, but there is no doubt that we shall survive Al-Qaeda. The Spanish people have not said that what happened in Madrid, hideous crime as it was, threatened the life of their nation. Their legendary pride would not allow it. Terrorist violence, serious as it is, does not threaten our institutions of government or our existence as a civil community.'

The real threat to the life of the nation (as Lord Hoffman goes on to imply) is the constant pressure by the present government to undermine civil liberties. Apart from the murder of Stephen Oake, which itself can be put down partly to mistakes made by the police the 'ricin plot' can just as readily be considered absurd as dangerous. In the Oake case four officers were attacked by one man *with a kitchen knife*. The worst conceivable outcome of the ricin plot. Duncan Campbell summed it up by suggesting an ASBO.

From the point of view of RSG, the significance of the 'ricin plot' is that it will be used (is already being used) to demonise asylum seekers. We should remember that this ridiculous affair is the best the authorities can come up with, and take (and encourage our neighbours to take) everything they say from henceforward with a very large grain of salt. [JC]