



Grant renewed!

RSG got new funding for a full-time worker through the Home Office Refugee Challenge Fund. But no more cash for activities

Annette Hughes writes: Good news and bad news ... Let's start with the sad news that we were unsuccessful in securing continued funding with the Home Office for the Purposeful Activities Fund. This sadly means a farewell to Adam's post at the end of October. We are most disappointed in this outcome – the project has begun to really take shape, with growing numbers of asylum seekers participating in the various leisure and recreational activities Adam has been organising. It has also proved a huge success in getting people together and in those using the service taking a more lead role in the activities and pursuits they

would like to do. Adam has worked very hard at making the project more user-led, and has done a great job co-ordinating it all. A big impact on the asylum seekers will be the loss of access to the sports facilities we have been able to provide – being able to provide swimming and use of the gym has been a lifeline for those asylum seekers with very little income and little to do except ponder and worry about their asylum appeals or status.

If you have any ideas of any funding opportunities we can pursue to continue this project please do get in touch.

As for the good news – the Home Office has agreed to fund a full-time worker for one year through their Refugee Challenge Fund. This project will be looking at increasing opportunities for refugees in terms of employment, education and general integration into the local community. We will be looking into this by working more closely with other agencies in Exeter (and Devon), providing support and training to other groups as well as advice and signposting to refugees from our enquiry service. We are currently compiling a detailed job description and information pack and will be advertising very soon.

RSG gets evaluated

Many of you may be aware that RSG is currently undergoing an evaluation of its services. This is being funded by the Community Fund/Big Lottery and follows on from our successful 'pilot' period of funding which ran from Octo-

ber 2003 to March 2005. We already know this was a successful period by our award of further funding from the Big Lottery for the next two years, but the evaluation is focusing much more on what our customers want from us

us to enable us to develop services even further.

We have asked Angie McTiernan, a freelance consultant, to undertake this work and she has taken

(see next page)

Also in this issue

Closing the door: immigration since 1905 and Afghan election (next page)

Human rights under attack: further undermining of civil liberties in the war on 'terror' (page 3)

Algeria: the risk of returning terror suspects to a country that practises torture routinely (page 4)

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

Editors

Annette Hughes,
David Mezzetti and
Jeremy Cushing

RSG management committee

AGM

RSG's annual general meeting will be taking place this year on the evening of Thursday 6 October. The first part of the evening will be spent looking at RSG's activities and progress through the year April 2004-March 2005, with time for the election of members to the management committee, followed by a poetry reading and a buffet supper. If you have not received an invitation yet and would like to attend please contact the office. (Space may be limited because of the capacity of the venue.)

Evaluation *(cont from page 1)*

on the challenge with much enthusiasm and drive. With her vast experience in working with organisations we are sure to receive much help in continuing to monitor and evaluate our services ourselves. Angie is being helped by Hassan Daneshgar in translating and interpreting materials and Sarah Taragon in pulling together information from RSG.

To date focus groups have been held with a sample of volunteers and service users, and telephone interviews with past users of RSG. These were well attended

with 10 volunteers taking part in one group, and 13 service users coming to focus groups. Another 6 service users have participated in the telephone interviews. We anticipate interviewing a handful more individuals this way.

The statistics that we collated over the period are also being analysed, along with other records we have, specifically correspondence from individuals and organisations. We expect the evaluation to be completed by end October/early November and will publish a summary of our findings here. [AH]

AFGHAN ELECTION

On Sunday 24th September Afghanistan went to the polls to elect the *Wolesi Jirga* (lower house of parliament) amid bitter controversy about the Afghan constitution, the Karzai government, continuing US military operations and the participation of former warlords and Taliban as candidates. The turnout was about 50% of the 12.5m registered electors, well down on 70% for the presidential elections last year. There are still 30,000 foreign troops in the country, including 18,000 US troops fighting the Taliban.

Closing the door



The 'Kindertransport': young Jewish girl arriving at Harwich in 1938

'Closing the door' was the title of a recent exhibition at the Jewish Museum in Camden, which marked the centenary of the Aliens Act of 1905. This was the first legislation to restrict immigration, and like subsequent acts was a response to a public panic: in this case, mainly about Jews emigrating from Eastern Europe to escape persecution in the Russian Empire, but also about increasing Chinese and Italian immigration. The language of public debate was openly hostile and immigrants were described as an 'evil' in terms which (as the museum displays remark) are very similar

who appeared to be undesirable. The history of immigration legislation since then is, depressingly, a more or less continual narrowing of categories able to enter Britain. (The development of the EU and its liberal migration policies is an encouraging counter-trend, but only for Europeans.) The First World War saw governments being given much greater powers over aliens, who had to register with the police. After the war these powers were made permanent by the 1919 Aliens Restriction Act and the 1920 Aliens Order, under which immigrants needed work permits and could be deported if they

to what is said today. Immigrants were blamed for social problems – especially shortages of housing and jobs – and were accused of bringing immoral practices and spreading disease. Politicians then as now were willing to play on public anxieties to gain votes.

The 1905 Act gave the government powers to exclude immigrants

were seen as causing unrest.

In 1948 the British Nationality Act gave all citizens of Britain's colonies the right to enter Britain, but increasingly this right was restricted under succeeding Acts. This time the panic was about immigrants from the Caribbean, India and Pakistan. Acts in 1962, 1968 and 1971 'progressively dismantled' the rights of non-white Commonwealth citizens: the 1971 Immigration ('Grandfather') Act restricted the right of entry to those with at least one grandparent born here. (Again, the special permission to 21,000 Asians evicted from Uganda is an encouraging exception.)

Since 1996 a new emphasis has been placed on asylum, seen as a means of bypassing immigration controls, and there have been four asylum and immigration acts since then, successively reducing the possibilities of anyone legally entering the UK to claim asylum (the 'kayak' principle: see the November 2003 issue) and also the rights and quality of life of asylum seekers who do manage to make it.

[JC]

Human rights under attack

Following Tony Blair's assertion that 'the rules of the game have changed' as a result of the July bombings, the government has moved to change British law yet again, once more putting traditional civil liberties under strain in order (as they say) to be able to counter the terrorist threat. Once again, this government's rhetoric and policies seem likely to impact particularly on ethnic minorities and refugees; but the rest of us may soon be threatened, too.

Deportation and torture

The Home Secretary is planning to deport to their home countries persons considered to be a threat to the UK. As these countries (so far, Jordan and Algeria) are notorious for the use of torture, this is thought to contravene Britain's obligations under the UN Convention against Torture as well as the European Convention on Human Rights. To overcome this problem the government is negotiating agreements with the countries concerned that they will not breach the human rights of deportees. Organisations with experience of these things believe that such agreements will not be adhered to (for Algeria see next page), and it seems likely that British (and after them, European) courts will prohibit the deportations. So far, the government's attempts to bully the judges do not seem to have worked (judging by remarks made by Lord Bingham the other day). Meanwhile the government refuses to admit that it connives at torture, though there is now convincing evidence that it does ('He's simply lying' as Craig Murray says of Jack Straw's denials). This suggests that the government simply does not care if deportees are tortured (see col 3, right).

'Glorifying' terrorism

A provision which requires new legislation, and which is incorporated in a bill just laid before Parliament, is Tony Blair's much-touted criminalisation of glorifying terrorism. At first sight one warms instinctively to this idea, since it's difficult not to feel that anyone actually glorifying what happened in London on July 7th is beyond any possible pale of civilisation. However, further examination makes one a bit more cautious. What does 'glorify' mean? (Will they prosecute Ken Living-

stone or Cherie Blair?) What does 'terrorism' mean? (The UN was unable to agree on a definition, the stumbling block being basically the use of methods like suicide bombs by movements which are resisting illegal occupation of a nation.) What instances of 'terror' we include: will it be illegal to support Israel's 'targeted' assassinations, or Russian abductions in Chechnya, or CIA 'renditions', or Belfast murals? We're already told that the Easter Rising will *not* be included. Basically, it's probably impossible to frame a law which will not include ordinary citizens expressing opinions which may be thought distasteful but are in no way dangerous; or people (like Cherie or Ken) suggesting that suppressed populations without cluster bombs, tanks and Hellfire missiles may have to resort to more desperate methods. Like ID cards, the law risks criminalising a substantial proportion of our population. Moreover, what is wrong with the present law on incitement?

Internment

A third proposal is to extend the time police are allowed to detain you if they arrest you on suspicion of various acts related to terrorism. The large majority of people arrested on such charges so far have ended up being released. The Government proposes three months (as compared to the present total, already increased, of 14 days: seven days was sufficient for the IRA). Those opposed say that this amounts to internment without trial. Practically speaking, moreover, it would be bound to be used overwhelmingly against people with black or brown skins. This is of course not likely to encourage the co-operation of Muslims.

Banned organisations

This is the idea that organisations which are 'associated with' the promotion of terrorism can be banned by the Home Office. Currently a popular target would be Hizb ut-Tahrir, which claims not to approve of violence. Many people dislike Hizb ut-Tahrir, and probably for excellent reasons. But would banning it make it less attractive to young extremists, or cause it to moderate its policies, or enable the authorities to negotiate with it? This proposal reflects more a populist scramble for votes than real, practical strategies to fight terrorism.

[JC]

Pinning politicians down

More correspondence with New Labour

In a statement by the Foreign Secretary dated 19th February 2004 he said that 'as a result [of the questioning of individuals at Guantanamo] valuable information has been gained'. Since it is widely reported that such questioning is routinely done by methods amounting to torture, we wrote to ask whether the Foreign Secretary approves of the use of torture. Over the succeeding months this question has been consistently ignored, or various (familiar) devices have been used to avoid answering, including the customary pretence that Tony Blair has no responsibility for policy operated by cabinet ministers.

11 May 2004: from the Foreign Office:

[concerning treatment of British detainees at Guantánamo] We are very conscious of the importance of seeking to safeguard the welfare of all British Nationals detained at Guantanamo Bay. ... British officials have visited Guantanamo Bay on seven occasions, most recently from 8-9 March.

4 August, 2004; to the FO: Can you tell me whether you agree that British personnel participated in interrogating British citizens while in custody in Afghanistan and Guantánamo, as is claimed by men released recently? Can you also tell me whether when the Foreign Secretary notes that 'valuable information has been gained' by interrogation at Guantánamo he includes information gained through torture?

24 October, 2004, to the FO: reminder (no reply so far)

Various dates: to the PM's office: requests for a reply to the FO letter. Acknowledgements but no answers.

17 December 2004: from the PM's office: As the matter you raise is the responsibility of the Foreign Office, [the PM] has asked that your letter be forwarded to that Department so that they may reply to you direct. (They haven't.)

13 August 2005: to the PM's office: Can you tell me whether you are aware of a policy not to reply to letters concerning the government's attitude to torture?

16 September, from the PM's office: Repeats letter of 17th December. Question about whether there is a policy not to reply to letters about torture ignored.



Algeria

The Government is currently negotiating, and reportedly about to complete, a 'memorandum of agreement' with Algeria under which Algeria guarantees to respect the rights of persons deported there from the UK. However Algeria's history, and the reports of numerous independent bodies (and the Foreign Office) indicate that Algeria is perhaps one of the most dangerous places in the world to send people to who are suspected (however unjustly) of sympathy with Islamic terrorism.

will guarantee the safety of Islamist terror suspects returned there from the UK.

Everyone reports that the level of human rights abuse by the security forces has declined. However it is believed that this is not because of reform of the security forces but because, basically, the war against the GIA has been effectively won and there is no longer the need for large-scale repression. Abuses do still occur and there seems to be a culture of impunity in which they are rarely investigated and government agents accused of them are not prosecuted. Recent promises by the government to clamp down on abuses by police are widely disbelieved.

Amnesty International USA

[Our] research indicated that torture is systematically practiced on those suspected of crimes categorized as 'acts of terrorism or subversion' and held for 12 days in what should be a period of *garde a vue* [detention during investigation] with legal safeguards to protect the detainee, but is often secret and unacknowledged detention. ... Beatings with fists, batons, belts, iron bars or rifle butts are frequently mentioned ... Some victims have reported being whipped and slashed with sharp implements, or being strangled almost to the point of suffocation. Others have had cigarettes extinguished on their body or face, have burning cigarette ash thrown in their eyes, or been scorched by a soldering iron. To increase the pain, the victim's body may be soaked first in water. Some victims have reported being threatened with sexual violence, sometimes after being undressed and tied up.

One noticeable development in the last two or three years is the relative increase in the use of methods which leave few traces. The so-called chiffon method of torture, in which the victim is tied down and forced to swallow large quantities of dirty water, urine or chemicals through a cloth placed in their mouth, is one such example. ... The

implications of torture being used systematically in 'terrorism'-related cases ... are very serious indeed ... Convictions are often made, largely or solely, on the basis of statements obtained in the custody of the security forces under duress, gravely prejudicing the right to a fair trial and leading to long prison sentences or, in some cases, the death penalty.

US Department of State

During the year [2004] security forces killed numerous suspected terrorists. In September, Interior Minister Zherhoui stated publicly that 450 terrorists had been killed, arrested or had surrendered during the first 8 months of the year. ... There were 93 civilian deaths at the hands of terrorists, compared to 198 in 2003. Terrorists were also responsible for the deaths of 117 members of the security forces, compared to 223 last year.

UK Foreign Office

Alongside the violence committed by the Islamic armed groups over the last decade are numerous documented allegations of human rights abuses by the security forces and state-armed militias, including the enforced disappearances of at least 4000 people, abductions, tortures and extrajudicial killings. The UK Government continues to urge the Algerian Government to comply fully with all its obligations under international human rights law, including the investigation of human rights violations ...

Human Rights Watch (USA)

There was a noticeable decline in reports of human rights violations committed by the security forces compared with the mid-1990s. But the pattern of violations suggested that any decline was caused more by the drop in political violence than by stronger safeguards against abuse. ... While reports of torture were down in absolute numbers, prisoners were still at high risk of being tortured by their interrogators.

[JC]

On September 15th seven Algerians (four of them acquitted in the ricin trial, for which see the June issue) were arrested in preparation for their deportation.

Algeria used to be a French colony, with substantial population of French 'colons'. After World War II a rebellion broke out which eventually resulted in Algeria's independence in 1962. This civil war was exceptionally vicious and both sides used terror including mass murder and torture on a large scale.

Independent Algeria was governed by the victorious rebels: the National Liberation Front (FLN), basically a secular state. Islamic opposition grew and in 1991 the Islamic Salvation Front (FIS) won a surprise victory in elections. Instead of giving up power, however, the FLN resorted to savage repression and during the 1990s Algeria was once again torn apart by civil strife; in which once again both sides used the most horrific methods. During the 1990s between 100,000 and 150,000 people are thought to have died. The Islamists formed the al-Jama'ah al-Islamiyah al-Musallah, or Groupe Islamique Armé (GIA), which used all the classic terrorist methods we have come to expect from al-Qaeda: massacres of whole villages, assassinations and car bombings, kidnaps and throat-cutting. They declared particular war on foreigners and more than a hundred are known to have been murdered by them.

The government and army, faced with this threat, reacted with similar violence, which still continues, though with somewhat reduced intensity and scope.

It is therefore obvious that Algeria is a country where believers in Islamic rule are likely to suffer extreme ill-treatment if they fall into the hands of the authorities. It is this government which we are hoping