

Asylum figures 'plummet'

Asylum applications to the world's rich countries are down again. This means we have an opportunity to stop panicking and turn our attention to treating asylum seekers better. The British government has reacted by reintroducing Blunkett's discredited vouchers scheme ...

The 2005 figures for asylum applications in the UK are down by 25% on 2004. This makes the UK 18th in the developed world in number of applications per head of the population. It is the lowest number of applications since 1993.

For the developed world as a whole applications are also down, by 15% on 2004. The UN High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) says the reason for this worldwide decline is partly the ending or reducing of some spectacular conflicts which scarred the 1990s (especially in former Yugoslavia, then Iraq, Liberia, Russia and the Sudan); partly improvements in the condition of life in some countries, and partly increasing restrictions applied by rich countries which receive asylum applications. The UK is a leader in this last category, with strenuous efforts by the Blair government to get asylum applications down after they peaked in 2002 at 103,000, endangering Labour's re-election prospects.

One reason for the UK's success is simple geography – the UK is difficult enough to reach (figures for Australia have gone down even more). Another is our government's willingness to assist geography by enhancing the difficulties experienced by refugees who try to come here.

A second strand of government policy, however, has been to make life unbearable for asylum seekers who, nevertheless, succeed in getting here and who for various reasons cannot be sent back to 'safe third countries'. New Labour has proved willing to go to extraordinary lengths in inventing more and more extreme and brutal ways of doing this: refusing support to 'section 5' applicants, offering support only through vouchers, splitting up families, incarcerating people in detention centres and so on. Many of the schemes were successively struck down by the courts, but the government has been in-



genious in coming up with substitutes.

Sadly the Blair government shows no sign of taking advantage of the good news by relaxing its relentless campaign against asylum. Instead, as part of the current passage of yet another asylum bill, it this week became clear that it would reintroduce the voucher scheme previously abandoned (amid almost universal disgust) under David Blunkett in 2002. The vouchers will be issued to 'hard case' failed asylum seekers. These are people whose applications were turned down but who the government itself oxymoronically admits cannot be sent back to their own countries because it would be too dangerous. There is no possible good policy outcome: the government's motivation is obscure unless (as so often) it is purely electoral. [JC]

Also in this issue

Big demand for training courses and help to find jobs; committee report and RIP: the NCADC. Also Refugee Week and sign up for citizenship course (next page)

Iran: Fran's poetry corner and growing concern about human rights (page 3)

New immigration rules (page 4)

REFUGEE SUPPORT GROUP DEVON

www.rsgdevon.org.uk

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 and Jeremy Cushing

news.rsgdevon@virgin.net

RSG management committee

Next meeting is Wednesday 19th April in Wat Tyler House (see above), 6.45 p.m. Everyone welcome. For information contact the office.

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.

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

Big demand for training courses and help to find jobs

Susan Loughran writes:

Over the last 2 months RSG has helped over 50 refugees and asylum seekers access training opportunities and search for jobs.

St Sidwell's centre put on a 4-week word processing course taught by Mary Bate. RSG would like to thank Mary for all of her hard work, the learners really enjoyed the course and appreciated Mary's friendly and helpful manner. Many of the learners who attended this IT course have signed up to do more computer courses at St. Sidwell's centre and at Exeter library.

Some quotes from the learners...

'I met new people, 2 ladies from Exeter who were very friendly and other refugees and asylum seekers. The teacher was very friendly and helpful. I learned a lot more about computers, now I have a new email account, I can make a new file, insert pictures and search the internet using google and yahoo. I have now registered to do an ECDL (European Computer Driving License) course at Exeter library' (Mohamad Horsravie).

'The teacher was very good and she helped me a lot. I met many new people in the class which was good for me because I have only been in Exeter for 4 months' (Kamal Sherif).

'The computer class was very good. I learnt about email, how to

open an account and send emails. I also learnt how to buy things online and how to write a letter. The teacher was very good and helpful' (Omir Golani).

Other opportunities

RSG has also signposted people to courses at Exeter College, for example ESOL (English for Speakers of Other Languages), welding, catering and sport courses. Many refugees and asylum seekers have also started English and computer courses at LearnDirect, Exeter library.

Citizenship

RSG is holding a half day workshop on citizenship on the 8th or 9th of April from 9.30am – 1pm, followed by lunch. The programme will include: How our society is changing, Britain Today, British Customs and Traditions and Our Government. Please let us know if you are interested in attending this free workshop (see contact details on this page).

We have also helped many refugees fill in job application forms, register with local employment agencies, search for jobs and receive careers and training advice. Voluntary opportunities are another way for asylum seekers and refugees to gain new skills and confidence, practise their English and meet new people, which many have signed up to. If you are interested in attending a course or doing voluntary work or want help to find a new job, please contact us (see left). [SL]

RIP: the NCADC

The way stateless Jews are pouring into every port of this country is becoming an outrage. The number of aliens entering the country through the back door is a problem to which the Daily Mail has repeatedly pointed. [Daily Mail, August 1938]

Ken Livingstone was right to suggest that working for a British right-wing newspaper was a bit like being a concentration camp guard. They (and the Mail is only one offender) are a major cause of evil in our national life.

The latest victory for right-wing, racist bigotry seems likely to be the demise of the National Coalition of Anti-Deportation Campaigns, which will have to close down in May unless major new sources of funding are found (which seems unlikely in the present climate).

Formed in 1995 to co-ordinate numerous local campaigns to stop the deportation of people facing persecution in their homelands (something which, of course, is supposed to be the aim of our official asylum system) the NCADC was mainly financed by the Community Fund, though many other charities have helped. During the years since right-wing newspapers and especially the Mail have waged an unrelenting war against it. The result has been to create a climate in which funding has been withdrawn and the NCADC is facing closure. You can help by making a standing order to the NCADC, 110 Hamstead Road, Handsworth, Birmingham B20 2QS (www.ncadc.org.uk). [JC]

Committee report

The RSG management committee met on 15 March. The main issues discussed were:

Major work has been done on the RSG website. Those with a mobile phone with internet access should now be able to view the RSG site on their mobiles. Please let us know whether it works! The website now has a section on volunteers, and all links now work. The website will be a regular

agenda item.

The meeting continued discussing funding applications, including currently Comic Relief and the Big Lottery.

The RSG leaflet as well as the Refugee Integration Project leaflets are now available in Dari, Farsi, Kurdish and English. All translations will be put on the RSG website shortly.

Planning for Refugee Week is

continuing (see right). A number of other organisations have shown interest, including St Stephens Church, Devon County Council, the Picture House and Exeter College.

The committee again discussed the recent evaluation report (see January issue). We need to improve our ongoing evaluation procedures, but we needed to monitor the cost of this and keep an eye on confidentiality issues. It was important to record outcomes, for future funding bids.

HELP WITH CITIZENSHIP?

RSG is holding a half-day workshop on the theme of citizenship on 8th or 9th April (see Susan's piece, left). Please contact us, saying which date you prefer.

REFUGEE WEEK

Plans are beginning to take shape. If you want to help please contact us – coffee morning, display stands, multi-faith service, poster competition, football tournament, film show, workshops, speakers ... you choose!

Growing concern about human rights abuse

As we publish 'Dear Fahimeh' on this page, Iran seems to be moving more and more into repression. Human rights organisations are sounding the alarm

Concern over human rights in Iran is of long standing. The regime practises all the classic techniques of repression: arbitrary arrests, unfair and sometimes secret trials, punishment for offences not defined in the criminal code, torture, solitary confinement and executions or mutilations, attacks on religious and ethnic minorities and peaceful political dissidents and a judiciary with insufficient independence from the political authorities. In addition there are several different systems of courts and several different security organisations, in addition to various unofficial and semi-official militias all of which can impact the lives of ordinary citizens without adequate redress and which are not securely controlled by the civilian authorities.

Iran's recent history provides some of the reasons for this, with Western interference overthrowing an incipient democracy in 1953 and installing a monarchy, this in turn overthrown by an Islamic revolution in 1979, which left Iran controlled by right-wing religious ideologues. A bloody eight-year war with Iraq (which was helped by the West) and the absence of any official relations with the USA gives still more reason for the regime to feel insecure. The current international furor over Iranian nuclear ambitions (whatever they are – and Iran is surrounded by potentially hostile nuclear powers) is likely to make this worse. There is also significant internal demand for more democratic institutions, opposed by an entrenched clerical authority under the Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei.

In June 2005 a new President, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, was elected on promises to improve the life of the poor. Ahmadinejad is also, however, a religious conservative closely allied with the clerical regime and as soon as he became president he moved to increase the intensity of political repression. He appointed to the key ministries of the interior and information two men – Mustafa Pour-Mohammadi and Gholam-hussein Mohseni Ezhei – both of whom have previously occupied powerful positions and been personally responsible for serious abuse of human rights. Pour-Mohammadi, for example, was one of those responsible for the prison massacres of around 4000 political dissidents in 1988, as well probably as the murder of

dozens of dissidents abroad when he was director of foreign intelligence. As minister of the interior he has appointed dozens of intelligence and security specialists (and also members of the right-wing Revolutionary Guard) to high positions in both central and regional government. Ezhei specialises in the suppression of press freedoms and has launched into a new campaign against writers, journalists, editors and internet activists.

In addition to the repression of political or minority ethnic and religious groups, since 1979 the religious leaders in the state have authorised and encouraged the courts to interpret national law, which claims to be based on religion, in a most extreme form. Recently for example a 16-year-old girl, Ateqeh Rajabi, was hanged for sexual misconduct although she reportedly had a mental age of 8. She was said to have been denied a defence lawyer. Her male co-defendant was sentenced to 100 lashes and then released. Sentences of stoning, hanging and physical mutilation are also regularly inflicted by the local vigilante groups known as the 'bassij', who operate under the protection of local religious leaders.

Apostasy (i.e. giving up Islam, having been a Muslim or been brought up by Muslim parents) is a crime. Even Islamic minority sects are now being attacked – in February this year the security forces in Qom used tear gas to detain hundreds of Sufi followers who were trying to protest against the demolition of their place of worship. A few days ago on 9th March a peaceful demonstration to mark International Women's Day in Tehran was broken up by police and revolutionary guards who beat participants with truncheons.

In spite of all these horrors there is ample evidence of a lively political culture in Iran, which is of course one of the oldest civilisations in the world. Many Iranians seem to be almost suicidally brave (something that people who have lived all their lives in the UK must find it impossible to understand); but thousands have been forced out of the country and cannot return as long as things remain the way they are.

What to do

Support anti-deportation campaigns. Write letters to Amnesty International (they do work): ua@amnesty.org.uk. [JC]

Fran's poetry corner

Occasional poems chosen by readers

Dear Fahimeh

That day,
that hot day in July,
when the Evin loudspeakers
called out your beautiful name and your lips
smiled, your eyes said to your friends,
'So today is the day.'

You went and your walk
was a perfume filling the corridor.
Everyone gasped, everyone asked with their
eyes,

'Is today then the day?' The Pasdar
flung back an answer: 'Where is her bag?
Where are her veil, her socks, her money?'

A rumour went round that you'd given a
sign

That yes, today was the day:
'I don't need my food,' you had said.

So tonight is the night.
A silence hangs in the heart of it.
Friends look at friends and tell themselves
That perhaps you'll come back.

Fahimeh dear, tell us, spare
a word for your friends. Is
the sky sad where you are, does it weep?
And the wind, does it ruffle your veil?
Back here, the ward sweats for your news.

And a message gets through:
wind-blown breathless dandelion
comes from the mountains to say that clouds
are massing up there and they're big with
child.

Head held high, you are standing and wait-
ing for this,
for the clouds to open, for you
to be mother of change.

Rifles crack.
The moorland holds its breath
at a star shooting across it.

It would be good to sing and go with friends
to face the firing squad, to dance,
to float in the rain.

In the long sea-silence,
a wave lifts, oars clip at the water.

A young fisherman bringing his boat to
land,
rice-growers trudging home,
they shape their lips to your name.

Your name is beautiful for young girls born
in July.

[Anonymous: written in Farsi for Fahimeh Taghadosi, who was executed in Iran in 1982. Appeared in the Independent, 15th January 2006]

New immigration rules

Following its consultation paper in February last year (see February 2005 issue) the government has announced the implementation of its new immigration quota system in a white paper, 'Making Migration Work for Britain'. The populist title will be offensive to many, especially in view of the many well-documented ways in which migration to the UK doesn't work for migrants. However the cover shows pictures of many happy smiling black faces. So that's OK.

The proposed system boils down to a ladder with highly-skilled people at the top and the unskilled at the bottom. There are five 'tiers' (the original proposal was for four), starting with graduates or post-graduates at the top; people with completed secondary education (A level equivalent: weirdly teachers and nurses are included in this) in tier 2; unskilled labour in 3; students in 4 and people working for 'primarily non-economic purposes' in 5. (This last is a bit of a rag-bag, including student exchanges, film stars, Chinese officials coming here to close down Rover and so on.) With the exception of a few minor categories the government intends everyone applying to work here to apply for one of the tiers.

The points system is intended to make it clear what qualifications you need to have before you can be accepted in any one tier. Some 'high-risk' people may have to post bonds in case they abscond. Except for tier 1, applicants will have to have 'sponsors' (employers, colleges, 'ministers of religion' etc – the government seems to have a thing about ministers of religion at the moment). The tiers are like the British class system, as one commentator remarked, and like the class system they award higher privileges the higher up you go. Tier 1 applicants don't have to have a job offer before they come, can change jobs without permission and will find it easy to get permission to stay. Tier 3 can't bring relatives and have much stricter time limits. And so on.

Reaction to the government's plans has been varied, as one would expect. It does seem fairer to have rules which are known in advance, so that people know what they need to achieve for success. The rules are also less subjective (they

don't involve immigration officials deciding on what your intentions are, like the old system) and therefore may be better administered. But the Joint Council for the Welfare of Immigrants (JCWI) thinks the rules are still too complex.

The white paper emphasises the benefits to be obtained from immigrants. They are cheap, work harder (according to employers), usually come already 'schooled and skilled' as one commentator put it, are far less likely to use welfare provision and contribute more than their share of taxes. It seems very unlikely that we could do without them, and the government clearly has no intention of making the attempt, whatever right-wing websites say.

World poverty

On the other hand, the proposals sit uneasily with the government's proclaimed intention to reduce world poverty (and especially poverty in Africa) since they seem likely to reduce the numbers of immigrants from the poorest countries. Tier 3 immigration does not affect the EU, since people from the EU can work in this country anyway. Low-skilled immigration from outside the EU (including from the world's poorest countries) is intended to be reduced, since we can now rely on workers from eastern Europe. People working abroad and sending money home are probably the most important single source of aid for poor countries (and probably the least corrupt). For people in developing countries who have limited access to education, working in the 'first world' may also provide a "launch pad" for bettering themselves', as the JCWI points out. Restricting jobs to European workers will deprive them of this possibility.

Another effect on the poorest countries is the continuing leakage into the UK of trained personnel from the third world. In spite of efforts by the government to restrict this it still goes on: in 2004 over 3300 people registering with the Nursing and Midwifery Council were from 16 countries on a list of those banned by the government for NHS recruitment.

Exploitation of illegal labour

We are, as the Commons Public Accounts Committee has pointed out, still

bad at regulating illegal immigration and people trafficking. There is no immediate prospect of the Home Office being able to control our borders efficiently – there simply isn't the money. So the new measures, by cutting down on previous immigration schemes, will be a charter for people trafficking. Narrow limits on tier 3 workers may also 'create a perverse incentive' for them to seek jobs in the dodgier parts of the economy. The JCWI fears that this may mean even more people open to serious exploitation because they cannot appeal to the law to protect them. The government does not seem very committed to increasing legal protections (see last issue).

Abuse

Regrettably, the white paper also parrots the government's obsession with abuse. The words 'abuse' or 'abused' occur 23 times in the document (30 times in its February 2005 predecessor: progress, perhaps?). It is probably less damaging here than in public speeches, but is still one of the most unattractive aspects of the Blairite approach to immigration and asylum. Many people now think that public anxiety about immigration is being fuelled by this kind of rhetoric from politicians. Allegations are rarely justified by any factual evidence.

The government is committed to a range of hi-tech improvements to existing immigration control mechanisms – more and more finger-printing, bigger databases, ID cards and a clutter of expensive and unreliable biometric gadgets to support them. It also wants to restrict opportunities for appeals. There is a real fear that this will make life more difficult for immigrants instead of simplifying it, especially for the unknown but large (500,000?) number of illegal workers already in the country, who, again, will be wide open for exploitation. The prospect is the creation of more and more secret databases whose contents affect people's lives although they are given few opportunities to correct errors.

In short, the new proposals are not all bad, but they do suffer from the faults typical of this government. The need to scrutinise, and if necessary resist, new measures remains.

[JC]