



# Charities challenge destitution

'Well my week of living on a tenner has finished' – so writes Jonathan Cox, the Refugee Council's parliamentary and external relations officer, in his blog (well worth reading – see link at the end of this article). The Refugee Council has been supporting the campaign by Church Action on Poverty (CAP) protesting against government policies which inflict destitution on asylum seekers in order (it seems likely) to force them to return home, deter new applications and prove to an alarmed public that the government is tough on so-called abuses of the system.

The CAP 'Living Ghosts' campaign started last December with a declaration from over 50 religious leaders saying, among other things, that 'the threat of destitution is being used as a way of pressuring refused asylum seekers to leave the country'.

The government denies this, arguing that if people's asylum claims fail it is not reasonable for them to be a drain on public funds.

Why are asylum seekers driven into destitution? Firstly they are not allowed to take paid employment, so they cannot support themselves. Instead they are supposed to rely on support from the National Asylum Support Service (NASS),

accommodation and an allowance of about £37 a week. Secondly the Asylum Act 2002 allowed the government to deny support to (and therefore inflict destitution on) anyone who does not apply for support quickly enough. This failed when challenged in the courts, but a further Act in 2004 allowed the government to remove support from the families of failed asylum seekers. When an asylum seeker's claim fails, they are given two weeks' notice to quit their NASS accommodation and their allowance is stopped. The government's intention is that they should then leave the country. In fact, many believe they cannot, because they are in genuine fear of persecution back home – in other words, because their original asylum claim was true. Since they cannot leave the country they slip into the world of illegal immigrants and become 'living ghosts'. They are forced to live on charity handouts or help from friends. Some can obtain £5 a week and a food parcel from the Red Cross. If they cannot find anyone to supply free accommodation, they have to sleep rough.

RSG is familiar with the problems met by people in this situation, and we maintain our emergency fund (see panel to the right) mainly in order to be able to offer help to local asylum seekers. Contributions are urgently

needed (see panel below).

As part of the Living Ghosts campaign, Jonathan Cox set out to live an approximation of this destitution by spending only £10 on consumables for a week. His lifestyle did not add up to the full misery of a failed asylum seeker (his fixed costs were not withdrawn; he had somewhere to live, and so on), but in the effort to pay for things like food and transport he does illustrate many of the problems the government inflicts on asylum seekers.

For Jonathan's blog see <http://livingghostsendurancechallenge.blogspot.com>; for Living Ghosts see <http://www.churchpoverty.org.uk>. [JC]

## RSG EMERGENCY FUND

*Do you complete a self assessment tax return?*

Did you know you can directly donate to charity any repayments due to you?

These donations will automatically be boosted with gift-aid tax and paid directly into the bank account of a charity of your choice.

If you would like to donate this way to Refugee Support Group Devon please enter our code on your tax return:

**FAS30WG**

All donations received can provide direct help to individuals in times of crisis and distress: see article on page 3.

## Also in this issue

Refugee Week update and Reunion and Committee report (next page)

Fran's poetry corner: Human Family and The RSG emergency fund (page 3)

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## REFUGEE SUPPORT GROUP DEVON

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## RSG management committee

Next meeting is Wednesday 17<sup>th</sup> May 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*

## Refugee Week

### Events planned so far:

Schools poster competition throughout Devon during May

Displays at Tiverton library, Exeter library, Exeter College and St Stephen's Church through the week

Sun 18<sup>th</sup> Football tournament

Mon 19<sup>th</sup> Schools poster comp awards ceremony (venue tba), speaker event, global centre (tba)

Wed 21<sup>st</sup> – Drama workshops for schools, JCWI speaker at DREC

Fri 23<sup>rd</sup> – St Stephen's Church coffee morning

Sat 24<sup>th</sup> – Multi-faith meeting at Quaker House, High Street activities, playdays at Belmont park

To be confirmed – further displays, music night, film showing at the Picture House and a food night. Wanting also to arrange a party for helpers of events, refugees and asylum seekers.

**RSG volunteer evening** Wednesday 31 May, 6.30pm. The aim of the evening is to get ourselves organised for Refugee Week, ensuring plenty of helpers for each activity. Full details for the should be in your inbox now – make sure you put the date in your diary and let us know if you can come! [AH]

## English classes for speakers of other languages (ESOL)

RSG has linked up with the WEA (Workers' Educational Association) to provide English (ESOL) classes for refugees and asylum seekers. They will be at St Sidwell's Centre every Monday and Tuesday from 10 to 12pm, starting 8<sup>th</sup> & 9<sup>th</sup> May.

If you are interested in attending these classes, please contact us as soon as possible. [SL]

## Reunion

### Peace, tolerance and better understanding

On Wednesday 5<sup>th</sup> April three members of RSG were among the large number of guests, representing organisations in the South West, invited to the Islamic Centre for REUNION, a follow-up to the hugely attended meeting held in the Museum last year after the London bombings. As at that meeting, there were talks from a wide range of speakers, some delicious food and time to meet old and new friends.

After a moving reading from the Holy Qur'an by Abdul, there were 18 most eclectic speakers including the Imam, the Deputy Mayor, the Jewish Community, an RE teacher, the United Reform Church, the police, the Devon Racial Equality Council, a Humanist, Amnesty International ... all bringing their understandings of peace, tolerance and better understanding. Themes emerged like needing to make the journey to others, an emotional and psychological journey, taking risks in doing so, and moving to interpreting the images of others

while needing to understand where we disagree. We were exhorted to own our own prejudices and challenge our own discrimination; summarising the Archbishop of York, to find friends, young and old, among the demonised and stand shoulder to shoulder with them; to expose the causes of injustice, if we are to live and grow together.

The keynote speaker was Dr Azam Atamimi, the Director of the Institute of Islamic Political Thought, who argued that confusions and lack of self knowledge could be corrected by understanding faith, that is our relationship with the creator and fellow humans; *Sharia*, meaning the way to the water well, which defines principles and moral guidelines to live by, and *Ummah*, meaning community. *Ummah* asserts the oneness of God and humanity, and the imperative to empathise with others, to take responsibility for supporting others, and not to allow the dislike of others to cause you to swerve from justice. The talk, and the answers to questions which followed, were a clarifying insight, certainly underlining the theme of the day. [FJ, with apologies for any misspellings.]

## Committee report

The RSG management committee met on 19<sup>th</sup> April. The main issues discussed were:

### Comic Relief bid

The committee approved the Comic Relief bid prepared by Annette and Susan.

### Big Lottery bid

The Lottery has approved our initial 'outline' bid and invited RSG to make a full applica-

tion. This doesn't guarantee success in the final bid but is a big relief.

The committee expressed appreciation of the hard work which went into preparing both bids.

### Citizenship workshops

The citizenship workshop held on 8 April was a great success. Further sessions will be held on specific topics. It seems as though the citizenship requirements are affecting a lot of people and our

provision will be important. It seems as though English classes as such are less popular than classes with a specific citizenship content.

### RSG accounts

RSG's new treasurer, Zen Bailey has prepared the end-of-year figures. It's a huge relief that we are on top of the figures again after a treasurerless period, and the committee was very grateful for Zen's efforts.

### Emergency fund

Annette reported that we had had

to cut down weekly payments to £10 again owing to funds being rapidly used up (see article, next page).

### Allotment

Pat Comery had agreed to take charge of the allotment, along with three others who are keen to help.

### Constitution

Proposed changes to the trusteeship and membership provisions of RSG's constitution will be considered at the AGM. Copies available from the office.

## Fran's poetry corner

Occasional poems chosen by readers

### Human Family

I note the obvious differences  
in the human family.

Some of us are serious,  
some thrive on comedy.

Some declare their lives are lived  
as true profundity  
and others claim they really live  
the real reality.

The variety of our skin tones  
can confuse, bemuse, delight,  
brown and pink and beige and  
purple,  
tan and blue and white.

I've sailed upon the seven seas  
and stopped in every land,  
I've seen the wonders of the world,  
not yet one common man.

I know ten thousand women  
called Jane and Mary Jane  
but I've not seen any two  
who really were the same.

Mirror twins are different  
although their features jibe,  
and lovers think quite different  
thoughts  
while lying side by side.

We love and lose in China,  
we weep on England's moors  
and laugh and moan in Guinea,  
and thrive on Spanish shores.

We seek success in Finland,  
are born and die in Maine.  
In minor ways we differ,  
in major we're the same.

I note the obvious differences  
between each sort and type,  
but we are more alike, my friends,  
than we are unlike.

We are more alike, my friends,  
than we are unlike.

We are more alike, my friends,  
than we are unlike.

[Maya Angelou]

## The RSG emergency fund

*The kind of destitution described on our front page and attacked by the Living Ghosts campaign exists in Exeter. RSG tries to help. You can help us ...*

RSG set up an emergency fund in 2003 to deal with a growing problem of financial hardship among local asylum seekers. The fund was set up by donations to RSG from concerned individuals, along with donations from groups such as churches. RSG's other income is restricted to particular costs and it is generally specified by the funding organisations that payments to individuals are not permitted, therefore private donations are absolutely vital to us to continue helping individuals.

The amount of financial help RSG can give to individuals is dependent on the amount of money we have in the fund at any one time. This unfortunately means that the more people that need our help (and we have seen an alarming increase of destitution amongst asylum seekers locally) the less we are able to help each individual. Where once we may have helped individuals (that have no other income) with a subsistence allowance of £20 per week our situation now is such that we can only help with £10 and not necessarily weekly. This amount seems particularly small, but as in Jonathon Cox's experience it can make a big difference.

We are also faced then with the dilemma of being able to provide assistance in those one-off emergencies that may be more costly. With the extortionate transport costs to get people to legal help (generally London), there are times that up to £100 is needed at once. To ensure we can help those most at need we need to maintain a healthy balance on our emergency fund.

### What the emergency fund does

The following are examples of the kind of financial emergency the fund deals with. All names have been changed.

*Martha* arrived in the office with her two children. She was armed with benefit applications and letters from various benefit and utility providers. She was entitled to this, she wasn't entitled to that. Having previously been supported by her partner she was at a complete loss of what the letters meant and what to do next. Recently becoming a single parent she didn't know

what support she could or should be getting. But it was clear that on this day she was penniless and desperate. To meet her immediate needs the emergency fund was able to help Martha with cash for her electricity key and to buy food for the week. In long term volunteers were able to help Martha to understand what the letters were about, fill in application forms and seek advice from the Citizens Advice Bureau and a solicitor.

*José and Omar* had their support from NASS terminated at least 6 months ago. Both have independently sought further legal help and have solicitors who have submitted fresh asylum applications. To date the Home Office have not acknowledged these applications, so they have no evidence that their claim is still pending. This leaves them with no entitlement to support. Without permission to work they are relying on friends for all their living needs. This puts a huge strain on those supporting them as it cannot be known how long they will need this help. The emergency fund has been able to provide a small weekly sum to contribute to food costs.

*Hamid* has been seeking legal help after his solicitor seemed to disappear. For almost six months he has had no contact and never had any calls returned from the solicitor or the firm she represented. Following advice from the Refugee Council and other legal bodies RSG volunteers helped to find a new solicitor. The emergency fund will help to pay for the costs of getting to London for his appointment.

[AH]

**The emergency fund really can make a difference. Donations are urgently needed: regular payments (however small) are particularly valuable as they enable us to plan ahead. Visit our website or contact the office for ways to donate (and please don't forget gift aid).**

# 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.*

The system is described 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. (They have already caused serious problems for doctors from outside the EU who have fallen foul of the new rules having already gone into debt to train in the UK.)

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.

This is part of a world-wide phenomenon. Traditionally, capitalist systems have always dealt with dwindling profits by recruiting cheap labour from outside the advanced world ('advanced' meaning places where unions and other democratic structures are strong enough to secure for workers a higher share of national income). Currently we are out-sourcing manufacture to places like China and India where workers can still be exploited. This will not last for ever, and in the mean time it is still worth trying to secure supplies of exploitable labour within the advanced world. Illegal immigrants are such a source par excellence, because they are insecure. The US currently has around 12m illegal residents and the political war about the need to keep them is hotting up daily: the Republican Party, which would be expected to respond to xenophobic voters, is having to listen to employers (another key constituency). These considerations do mean that governments have very little interest in increasing legal protections for illegal workers, or indeed stopping illegal immigration – whatever they say for the public.

## World poverty

The advantages of immigration are thus obvious. But on the other hand, current 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. (This is the rule under which trainee doctors are being refused work.) People working abroad and sending money home are probably the most important single source of aid for poor countries (and probably the least corrupt). Although this will still benefit the new EU states in eastern Europe, we will now be excluding the poorest countries in the world from working here.

## 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 such protections (see last issue).

Reductions in unskilled quotas from outside the EU may also tend to exacerbate racial hostilities.

## Abuse

Regrettably, the white paper also parrots the government's obsession with the supposed exploitation of the UK by foreigners. 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; politicians know perfectly well that most immigrants are exploited rather than exploiting, and that we could not possibly do without them. [JC]