



# Children in jail

*British charities are campaigning to end the scandal of immigrant children in Britain's detention centres*

Two thousand children (including babies) are locked up in Britain's detention centres every year; some with their families, some alone. Over 30% are held for more than seven days. One was held for 268 days. These children have done nothing wrong, but the law has been changed to prevent any outside judicial authority having the right to oversee the reasons for their imprisonment. Thus they have fewer rights than convicted criminals, and cannot know how long they will remain imprisoned.

Many of these children have already experienced arbitrary brutality and conflict in their own countries and are likely to be terrified. Their treatment by British immigra-

tion officers (e.g. raids in the early hours and lack of individual rights) is likely to re-awaken their fears.

British charities have pointed out that this policy breaches the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. It also avoids minimum standards for the treatment of children in British law (e.g. under the Children Act).

The campaign, called 'No place for a child' aims at persuading the UK government to find alternative ways of dealing with immigration problems involving children. If you want to help, write to the Home Secretary or your MP (see box). Log on to [www.no-placeforachild.org](http://www.no-placeforachild.org).

Write to: Rt Hon John Reid, MP, Secretary of State, Home Office, 50 Queen Anne's Gate, London SW1H 9AT. Find your MP at [www.locata.co.uk/commons](http://www.locata.co.uk/commons).



## Allotment news

Pat Comery writes: Some of the carpets have been lifted, exposing a host (?) of slowworms. Heroic digging has been done by Gholam Gholami, Barat Rahimi and Ali Rezui (sadly, my back prevents me ..). The potatoes are coming through, and the raspberries are looking good. Soon we'll put in some bean seedlings.

We've got our work cut out down there – the couch grass and dandelions are knee-high so any help would be much appreciated. We also need equipment (see box). A friend at the Environment Agency told me that they are always on the look out for activities on which to base their team-building exercises. I said

that we might be able to help them out ... Watch this space for notice of a joint RSG-EA digging day.

### CAN YOU SPARE

Wondering if anyone has any of the following garden stuff they would like to donate for the RSG allotment?

Posts (for fixing string to hold beans); string netting; hammer; strimmer; buckets/water carriers; seed trays; slug pellets; trowels. And we could always use a few more spades and forks. If so please email me directly: [PatComery@hotmail.com](mailto:PatComery@hotmail.com). [PC]

## RSG CITIZENSHIP CLASSES

After a successful Citizenship workshop in April, RSG has organised another three. They will run on **Saturday 3rd, 10th and 17th of June** at 15 York Road in Exeter from **10.30am to 1pm**. The course will cover topics from the 'Life in the UK' publication including: 'A changing society', 'Britain today – a profile' and 'How Britain is governed'. These workshops are designed to help people study for the citizenship exam they must take to become a UK citizen. If you are interested in attending all or any of these workshops, please contact the RSG office as soon as possible (see page 2, over).

Refreshments will be served.

## Also in this issue

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## REFUGEE SUPPORT GROUP DEVON

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## RSG management committee

Next meeting is Wednesday 21 June 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

**Exhibitions:** Look out for our information and artwork throughout the week at: Exeter College – Hele Road and Queen Street sites; Exeter Central Library; St Stephens Church, High Street, Exeter; The Plough, Barnstaple; Tiverton Library (11 – 18th June); and Exeter City Council Civic Centre. The displays include a photography project of Exeter through the eyes of a group of local refugees.

Refugee Week is launched this year on Sunday 18th June with a 5-a-side football tournament at King George V playing fields, Topsham Road, Exeter. Kick-off at 10am. Spectators welcome!

**Monday 19 June:** awards ceremony for Devon Schools poster competition.

Primary and secondary schools around Devon have participated in a regional Refugee Week poster competition. Come and see the artwork at the Civic Centre Foyer, Paris Street, Exeter 20th – 30th June.

Speaker: William Gallois – ‘Whatever happened to asylum?’ at the Global Centre, Exeter Community Centre, St David’s Hill, Exeter, 1.00 – 2.00pm.

In the medieval and early modern worlds, the idea of asylum was viewed as a force for social good, yet popular conceptions of asylum are often negative today. This talk looks at how a

shift in perception took place and what we can learn from the often more generous and tolerant cultures of the medieval world.

**Tuesday 20 June:** ‘Marmoulak (The Lizard)!’ at Exeter Picture House, Bartholomew Street East, Exeter – 6pm.

‘An escaped con impersonates a mullah in this spirited religious comedy. Courting both success and scandal in its native Iran, *The Lizard* is a winning religious satire’: BBC 2005. Iranian film with English subtitles.

**Wednesday 21 June:** Speaker: Tauhid Pasha, JCWI, at Devon Racial Equality Council, 14 York Road, Exeter, 5.30 – 7.30pm.

Tauhid is the Legal Policy Director at the Joint Council for the Welfare of Immigrants. He will speak on current issues and campaigns for refugees and asylum seekers with time for questions and discussion. Light refreshments will be available to start the event.

**Wednesday 21 June and Friday 23 June:** Two days of free awareness-raising workshops for primary school groups at the Phoenix Arts Centre, Exeter, run by the White Rabbit Theatre Company.

**Friday 23 June:** Coffee Morning at St Stephens Church, High Street, Exeter, 10.00 – 1.00pm. Come along and sample world cuisine, see our displays and meet people involved in refugee support in Devon – RSG, Amnesty

International, the Red Cross and Devon Racial Equality Council.

**Music:** Rebecca Worthley at the North Bridge Inn, Exeter, from 8.30pm. Rebecca is a local singer and songwriter who searches the deep and the political, drawing equally on folk, indie and filmic pop influences. Come and enjoy music that sends shivers down your spine at Exeter’s friendliest pub. (See also [www.rebecca-worthley.co.uk](http://www.rebecca-worthley.co.uk) and [www.northbridgeinn.co.uk](http://www.northbridgeinn.co.uk).)

**Saturday 24 June:** High Street, Exeter, 10.00 – 12.00 – look out for free balloons and fun this morning. White Rabbit Theatre will promote Refugee Week and Exeter Respect Playdays with some street theatre through the town centre.

Multi-faith celebration, Friends Meeting House, Magdalen Street (opposite Barcelona Hotel) 12.00 midday.

Organised by Exeter Amnesty International Group, the celebration consists of readings by representatives from various faith groups in Exeter, along with music from all around the world by the locally renowned “songlines” choir. Light refreshments afterwards. All are welcome!

Exeter Respect Playday – Belmont Park, Exeter, 12.00 – 4.00pm: a full afternoon of family fun with lots of play, music, dance, theatre and crafts. You can see the White Rabbit Theatre characters again in their fun performance at Belmont Park twice during this afternoon. Look out for the activity and information stalls from RSG, Amnesty International and the Red Cross. [AH]

## Committee report

The RSG management committee met on 17<sup>th</sup> May. The main issues discussed were:

**Citizenship workshops:** As previously noted these have proved popular, presumably because of the new citizenship requirement. They are based on the Home Office publication ‘Life in the United Kingdom’, (order online from

[www.tsoshop.co.uk](http://www.tsoshop.co.uk)). Following the success of the first workshop, three more are planned (see front page of this newsletter).

**The RSG allotment** is starting to become productive. It would be good if more refugees and asylum seekers could get involved. Contact Pat Comery at the email address on today’s front page. We could also do with donations of various kinds of equipment (also listed on front page).

The allotment is not easy to get to, but Pat is willing to give people lifts.

**Patrons:** Please send ideas on suitable patrons for RSG to the office (see above). It’s a tricky subject – it would not be a good idea for RSG to seem to favour one or other religion, for example.

**Website:** similarly please send ideas on items that would be of interest for the RSG website to

the office.

**Finance:** our finances were in reasonably healthy state in the short term, though in the long term we need more funding.

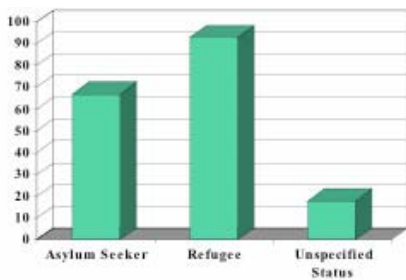
**Indemnity:** the committee discussed the ongoing worry about possible demands for payment from RSG trustees if RSG were to be sued. We can’t (apparently) exempt particular trustees who might have no income. Better governance, and suitable insurance, would be essential. Both would be investigated.

# Emergency fund progress

RSG has collected information throughout the year April 2005 to March 2006 of people who use our office-based services and for what reasons. We have helped 178 individuals with face to face enquiries – totalling 1601 visits for help.

Between April and December we received an average of 31 enquiries per month from refugees. From the beginning of January to the end of March we received an average of 113 per month.

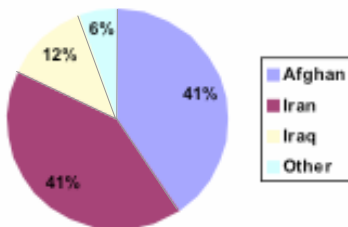
Enquiries from asylum seekers have been steady throughout the year, averaging 81 per month.



NUMBER OF SERVICE USERS YEAR 2005-2006

The majority of our enquiries are from men from Afghanistan and Iran, with an increasing number of visits to the office by people from Iraq. We have also helped people of Syrian, Bengali, Indian, Turkish, Kosovan, Angolan, Ivorian and Chinese nationalities.

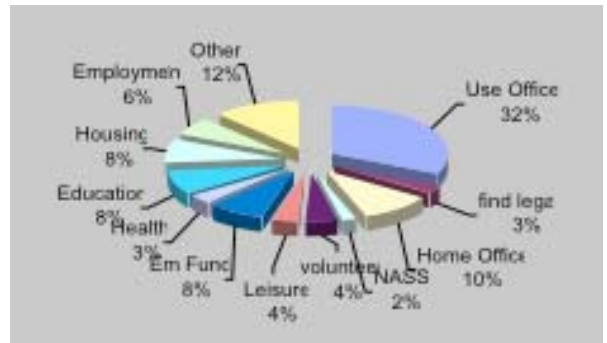
We receive very few requests for help from women.



The types of enquiry we receive are detailed in the chart opposite. A large percentage of people are using the office resources, such as computers, phone and fax, with increasing numbers requesting support in respect of employment and training. This year has seen a substantial number of individuals seeking support with Home Office applications for indefinite leave to remain following the completion of a four-year period of exceptional leave to remain. To date we have not heard of anyone having this application refused.

The emergency fund continues to be of vital assistance to individuals. Through the year we were able to help with 154 requests, issuing a total of £4,128.

All money for this has come from supporters of RSG in the way of private donations (thank you). Support has been required for food and subsistence for destitute asylum seekers, travel costs for obtaining legal help, telephone costs for individuals and clothing or equipment. There were times when lack of money meant that the emergency fund was unable to provide the support which



has been requested: e.g. subsistence support had to be reduced to £10, and individuals were asked to seek help for transport from friends. This is an issue that concerns RSG, and therefore fund-raising for this kind of support is a high priority. [AH]

## Fran's poetry corner

Occasional poems chosen by readers

### Revenge

My personal revenge will be your children's  
right to schooling and to flowers.  
My personal revenge will be this song  
bursting for you with no more fears.  
My personal revenge will be to make  
you see  
the goodness in my people's eyes  
implacable in combat always  
generous and firm in victory.

My personal revenge will be to greet  
you  
'Good morning!' in streets with no beggars,  
when instead of locking you inside  
they say, 'Don't look so sad'  
When you, the torturer,  
daren't lift your head.  
My personal revenge will be to give you  
these hands you once ill-treated  
with all their tenderness intact.

[Luis Enrique Mejía Godoy: song based on words by Tomás Borge addressed to his jailers and torturers. After the triumph of the Nicaraguan Revolution in 1979, Tomás Borge became Minister for the Interior and, famously, had his revenge by forgiving them.]

### At War

Hatred  
Hatred is everywhere  
War is agonising  
Don't you dare  
Old men argue while young men die  
Disaster and pain  
Caused by your shame  
We are all innocent, no one to blame  
I hear you cry ...  
children with no home  
forever left to roam  
Mothers screaming  
a child in pain  
Mothers numb  
trouble in their way  
Hospitals full to the brim  
I am only a child  
I know that this is wrong  
So much hatred you feel inside  
Listen to my song  
Listen  
Listen  
Listen  
Before the world is gone!

[Kellie Griffith, Yacoub Didi, Joanne Daniels, Mark Sussell and Daniel Lewis, aged ten]

# Blair renews attack on foreigners

Tony Blair achieved his first real boost in politics after the Bulger murder, by aligning Labour with the punitive, panicky elements in British popular opinion and with the poison of the tabloid papers. The slogan 'tough on crime, tough on the causes of crime' was reportedly coined not by him but by Gordon Brown. After an initial flourish with the Social Exclusion Unit Blair has never shown any interest in the latter part of the slogan. His government style has been characterised throughout by a particular strategy, aimed mostly at keeping the political initiative with Labour and preventing any law and order revival by the Tories.

The strategy was repeated this month after a poor showing in local election results and a resounding scandal over the Home Office's failure to ensure the deportation of foreigners convicted of crimes in British courts.

The strategy (which most of us will wearily recognise by now) consists of firstly fuelling public indignation rather than trying to reduce whatever the current panic is to a rational perspective; then proposing off-the-cuff 'tough' legislation, implying that it will provide an instant solution (and also ensuring that 'toughness' is associated with Blair personally), typically without any pretence of consulting the minister concerned. His proposals normally pay no attention to basic legal principles or human rights, and he may (as in this instance) attack not just criminals but judges as well.

Many of his comments have inflamed public distrust of foreigners, immigrants and asylum seekers (as well as judges). Recently, with the number of asylum seekers in free fall, we had hoped that he would become more moderate. However in face of the latest evidence of the inadequacy of the Home Office to deal with basic law and order problems he has renewed his attacks.

Thus he promised that the 'vast bulk' of foreign criminals would in future be automatically deported. The use of the word 'vast' suggests vast numbers, which seems to justify panic headlines. However the number of foreigners being freed (over several years) is said to be 1023, when 95,000 people are sent to jail in the UK

every year. It is also absurd to suggest that the government can order the courts to disregard the human rights of those proposed to be deported. And finally, of course, it is inherently racist (or at least xenophobic) to imply that there is something different about a criminal who has served his or her sentence simply because they are not British. It feeds the idea that our streets are infested by murderous foreign thugs.

Some have suggested that the PM does not really understand the Human Rights Act and its significance in relation to British law. (In a notorious email duel with the Guardian's correspondent Henry Porter he alleged that it allowed British judges to overrule British law, which is true only of secondary legislation.) However there is evidence, more seriously, that he simply does not care (remember the Hany Yousef case, or the PM's refusal to answer letters about his attitude to torture; not to mention his recent 'common sense' remarks). Securing votes is more important than avoiding the torture of a few insignificant individuals, as would happen if we sent people back to countries like Jordan, Egypt or Algeria (for example).

The real problem (as has been pointed out many times) is that control of the vast number of people who go in and out of this country every year (some of whom stay) would require far greater resources than the government has hitherto devoted to it. It would also require effective reform of the Home Office, since in its current state it is probably incapable of spending extra resources even if they were provided.

It has been suggested that immigration (including asylum) should be hived off to for an agency independent of the Home Office. What would be useful would be if the new agency were given political independence so as to be insulated from populist anti-refugee pressure emanating from Downing Street. In the mean time we are probably in for more xenophobic rants by politicians at least until the impending departure of Blair, who (as suggested) has played a very significant personal part in stoking up popular anxieties. We need to maintain constant opposition to the kind of legislative changes Blair seems to be proposing (though as usual the practice will probably differ from the initial rant). Mere-

ly a change at the top, however, won't provide the changes we need, and eternal vigilance still seems to be the price of liberty.

[JC]

## THE HUMAN RIGHTS ACT 1998

Numerous errors about the Human Rights Act (HRA) are currently in circulation, as the leaders of both main parties hint that it is undermining British law and they will amend or repeal it. It was passed in 1998, originating with John Smith's leadership and pushed through by Lord Irvine (Blair's first Lord Chancellor) and Jack Straw. It does two things: (a) recognises the rights of British citizens under the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR) (1950); (b) imposes a duty on all UK public bodies to conform to the ECHR in dealing with citizens.

These rights were available before, in fact since 1966: the Act simply makes them easier to protect since UK courts are obliged to 'take account' of them.

The ECHR was created by the Council of Europe, which (confusingly) is nothing to do with the European Union (EU). It was drawn up with Britain (and Winston Churchill) as one of the major players.

British courts cannot overrule British law even where they rule that the ECHR has been breached. They *can* overrule secondary legislation (rules made by ministers *under the authority* of Parliament, but not part of any act of Parliament). The Court of Appeal and the House of Lords can declare a primary law incompatible with the ECHR, but that does not force us to change it.

Repealing the HRA would not end our obligation to abide by the ECHR. And the UK cannot abandon the ECHR, because human rights are also recognised by the EU Court of Justice, so to do so would mean leaving the EU.

In any case, there is nothing in the ECHR which is not squarely in the liberal tradition of British legal history. The HRA, and the ECHR, represent not interference by Europe but the adoption by Europe of our legal principles.