



Farewell to Ian and Nasrullah

RSG is about to lose two of its longest-serving trustees. Ian Miller is leaving Exeter to start a new life in Penzance; Nasrullah Saifi now works in Kabul though he still visits Exeter sometimes. Both will be missed and we wish them all the best.

Ian Miller was at the Devon Racial Equality Council's meeting when Devon County's Sam Newman first announced that the Government was initiating a dispersal scheme for asylum seekers and that Exeter was to be one of the four consortia in the country in 2002. The asylum seekers being dispersed to Exeter were to be a language cluster, Farsi/Dari speakers,

and Devon County Council had a team of seconded social workers who would work with the National Asylum Support System (NASS) to accommodate and support the dispersees. DCC sought the support of volunteers for such things as befriending.

Ian was at the first meeting of those volunteers at the first NASS site, Bonhay House, and volunteered to be the chair of a small group of people which eventually became the Refugee Support Group, Devon. We spent most of our first meeting trying to decide on a snappy name for the group, while about twenty Afghans, without English and with shattered lives, looked on in bewilderment! Eventually we went for the plain RSG and developed some

activities and ad hoc support systems.

Ian saw the penniless group move from those early days, mistakes, inadequacies and successes through to last year when we had become established with an office and Project Coordinator. One success was the Consortium's award of the national consortium trophy, awarded by the Home Office for work with asylum seekers, the monetary reward being £4,000 a year which DCC handed to us. Ian held together a small team working with that very small budget to respond to need as best we could. One of the most rewarding outcomes has been the lasting friendships created at that time between local RSG supporters and the then asylum seekers. It has been very gratifying to Ian and all of us to see some of those asylum seekers now passing their Citizen-

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Bye bye Susan

This month we say a fond farewell to Susan Loughran, who is taking maternity leave. Baby is due in September and all in the office are getting very excited about the imminent arrival! Since commencing in January as our Refugee Integration Project Worker Susan has steam-rolled ahead with her tasks enabling RSG to branch out into much more work with refugees in terms of education, training and employment. Susan's enthusiasm, warmth and hard work have brought higher numbers of clients into the office

and provided new and interesting challenges for all the office volunteers. Susan has established links with so many organisations and agencies in Exeter and built up a good network and information base of services available locally. All this has ultimately provided more opportunities and support to our refugee friends, old and new. Looking at the achievements of the project so far it's as if Susan's been working much longer with us – she certainly became part of the team as soon as she set foot in the office! And she will

most definitely be missed. So we wish Susan all the best and look forward to meeting the new little one.

We welcome **Jenny Stephens** to RSG in a new capacity. Jenny is hanging up her volunteer cap and will be occupying Susan's old desk as our Refugee Integration Project Worker until the funding comes to an end in December. We are delighted to have Jenny with us four days a week instead of just one! (See report, next page.)

We are still trying to find further funding to continue this invaluable post – please contact us if you are able to help. [AH]

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RSG management committee

Sorry – last month I said the AGM was on 16th August. Not true – it's on 5th October (6 pm, St Sidwell's Community Centre). The next OGM is on 13th September, at 6.45 in Wat Tyler House as usual.

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

ARE YOU A PHOTOGRAPHER?

You may notice that there aren't any photographs in this issue.

This is not an accident. Or rather, perhaps it is. RSG staff and volunteers have been so busy recently that there hasn't been anyone to take any.

If you think you could help, please, please, get in touch.

Farewell to Ian and Nasrullah

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ship tests, driving tests and English exams and living and working happily in Exeter.

Ian was always modest and understated about his role in the RSG but he always brought compassion, without ever being patronising, and a fierce eye for detail, especially that for the well being and privacy of the asylum seekers and refugees. Everyone involved with Ian appreciates his loyalty, endurance and tolerance and especially for being there right from the sticky beginnings of RSG.

Nazrullah Saifi, an Afghan himself but living in Exeter, played a vital role in the lives of those early asylum seekers, being the translator for DCC at

the introductory meetings when the arrivals were made aware of the ways and hurdles of living in the UK. He translated everything from how to use the post office to the virtues of condoms.

Beyond the more public interpreting work, Nazrullah gave an enormous amount of support and advice to individuals, being able to straddle the two worlds of the UK and Afghanistan; people went to Nazrullah with forms, letters, queries and worries and he always retained his sense of humour.

Until two years ago Nazrullah avoided meetings but was persuaded to stand for the Management Committee, where he was particularly useful in ex-

plaining the views and opinions of the asylum seekers and refugees whom the committee serves.

Now Nazrullah is commuting between Exeter and Kabul, unable to leave Exeter permanently because 'it is so lovely' but working as an adviser to the Afghan Minister of Agriculture. If you see him when he is in Exeter do stop him and quiz him about Afghanistan for he is a fund of insights and a delightful conversationalist besides.

Many individuals and RSG have much to be grateful to Nazrullah for and we hope to see him around Exeter on one of his visits ... but don't expect him to turn up to a meeting! [FJ]

Susan's final report

The Refugee Integration project from January to August 2006 (edited)

Since I started work at RSG (in January) there has been a huge demand for the service I was appointed to provide. The numbers tell the story. From January to mid-August, we have helped 98 individuals with face-to-face enquiries (68 refugees and 30 asylum seekers). They received advice about employment, training and volunteering opportunities and where appropriate people were signposted to relevant organisations. The total number of visits for help during this period was 283, 112 queries relating to employment and 171 queries about training and voluntary work.

Examples of training information we helped people with included course content, registering on courses, volunteering and funding opportunities and help in locating relevant organisations.

We established links with other service providers and signposted people for help with employment and training opportunities to over 20 organisations which provide information, advice and guidance on career and training opportunities, and with actual training providers. Ensuring refugees are aware of the services available to them from lo-

cal organisations, and that they know how to access them, has been vital to the project.

The majority of the people we helped were men, 51% from Afghanistan, 31% from Iran and 17% from Iraq. We only had 3 queries from women.

Some of the outcomes people gained through the support we offered them have been: attending Nextstep appointments for advice on career and training opportunities, attending job interviews, gaining employment, completing a range of training courses, gaining new skills and qualifications and carrying out voluntary work. One individual was awarded a laptop to help him with his studies.

Over the last 8 months we helped 47 people attend training courses, ranging from various computer skills to English language and citizenship classes. The attendance and feedback we received from the learners has been excellent; they have enjoyed learning new skills as well as meeting new people from their community and many have progressed onto further courses.

Another way to help refugees enhance their skills and integrate with

the community is through volunteering. Many people are unaware of the benefits they can gain through volunteering and the opportunities available. We promote these, working closely with DRIVE at Exeter CVS. These included DJ'ing, cooking, gardening, work in a charity shop, IT support and police diversity training. The confidence and skills gained through volunteering are invaluable.

Working with asylum seekers and refugees, we have identified a range of barriers they face which prevent them from accessing job and training opportunities. Some of these barriers are lack of familiarity with the UK employment and volunteering system, English language and the range of training courses available in Devon and how they can access them. Attitudes and perceptions from employers, agencies and training providers are other barriers which also need to be addressed. It is our aim to ensure refugees and asylum seekers are aware of the services available to them and ensure they can access these services. This project will continue to increase the skill levels of beneficiaries and hence open up learning and job opportunities, to their and their communities' benefit. [JC,SL]

Immigration

Insights into the Government's immigration strategies — or mixed messages

Fran Jenkin writes: During Refugee Week the Devon Racial Equality Council hosted Tauhid Pasha, the Legal Policy Director for the Joint Council for the Welfare of Immigrants (JCWI).

He set out the context of government thinking: it wants to address public fears about jobs, benefits, the NHS and the dilution of 'our' culture.

Its response is more legislative measures, increasing controls, surveillance and the numbers game. There is a NAM, New Asylum Model, which defines ways to process greater numbers more quickly, to increase the use of detention centres, as for example to 'fast track' people with claims thought to be particularly implausible, profiling on the basis of nationality, on the grounds that some countries are supposedly more likely than others to produce 'bogus' asylum seekers, and electronic tagging to limit people to specified areas, with Group 4 having an alarm attached to the Home Office.

ARC biometric cards will be used to recognise eyes and voice, so for example when using the phone the speaker would be asked to repeat a phrase, e.g. 'the sun shines'!

Satellite tracking is planned, while European planes and ships will have to disclose their passenger lists.

Further proposals state that employers and the NHS will ask to see proof of leave to remain and permission to work. Without the former one will not have free medical treatment beyond hospital accident and emergency departments.

Since April 2006 the Home Secretary has had the power to deprive British citizens of their citizenship if 'their presence is not conducive to the public good' and this will apply particularly to dual passport holders 'so that they will think twice before indulging in such freedoms as those of speech and association.'

Another strand of Government immigration policy is 'managed migration', in response to falling birth rates and globalisation. This strand has three levels: the work permit system, the skills list and student visas. Students produce multi-million revenues for the UK. People may transfer from student status to the work permit system when they have achieved qualifications at degree level or above. Engineers are particularly being sought and there is recruitment in Bangladesh.

There is discrimination in the points-based system (PBS) which allocates people to levels according to their skills; those with lower skills are time limited, have no settlement rights and no rights to be joined by other family members.

The JCWI is campaigning for undocumented workers to become regularised so that they can be protected from exploitation and legally contribute to the UK. The unions are actively supporting this campaign, which is based on human rights and international obligation.

It is worth remembering that the UK is falling down the European table league of asylum seekers and that less developed countries, Iran, Pakistan and Central Africa bear the burden of refugees.

Interestingly Scotland is having a completely different debate; immigration is being encouraged to boost the economy. [FJ]

RECOMMENDED READING

UNHCR: 'The State of the World's Refugees.'

'The Stratification of Rights': available from www.jcwi.org.uk. Tauhid can be contacted at tauhid@jcwi.org.uk

One law for the Natwest Three

Duncan Atkinson writes: As the 'Natwest Three' receive bail in the US, the case of Babar Ahmed seems far as ever from a happy resolution. The difference is that latter case seems to be viewed as old news, even with the appeal being decided at present.

Babar Ahmed was arrested in December 2003 under the Terrorism act, released without charge and arrested again in August 2005. He is accused of raising funds for Al-Qaeda via internet sites, and encouraging terrorism in Afghanistan and Chechnya since 1998. His lawyers cannot rule out the possibility of a death sentence, or incarceration at Guantánamo Bay as an enemy combatant. This contrasts with the Prime Minister's offer in July of 'support and assurance' to the Natwest Three over their bail, though he felt unable to block the extradition.

Tragically even unconvicted terror suspects are made establishment pariahs — even British citizens of foreign descent with degrees and clean records.

The much-criticised 2003 act used in both cases means the US need only present evidence for an extradition, rather than prove a case. No other European country has entered into a similar treaty with the US. A spokesman for the Prime Minister has claimed extraditions from Britain had previously been more difficult for the US, and the act put it on a 'level playing field'.

The real comparative seriousness of the Babar Ahmed case is shown in the effect on Muslim communities. Described in a report by Khalida Yusuf, MA, of the Free Babar Ahmed campaign, the general feeling seems confirmed that the US is incapable of trying Ahmed fairly. The Natwest Three are accused of serious crimes, but the feelings of deep mutual mistrust in the latter case are relevant to everybody in Britain.

Admittedly, it shows a kind of parity that both these cases have taken the same direction. But it seems disappointing that the diverse sections of society opposed to these extraditions, along with opponents of deportations such as that of Muhammad Osama Sayes, seem not to have become aware of each other as opponents and victims of the same policy. [DA]

The race to the bottom

They're at it again: the two main parties have once again started their customary race to the bottom in commenting on immigration issues. The Tories started it when their immigration spokesman, Damian Green, called for limits on the right to live in Britain when two new states, Bulgaria and Romania, join the EU (probably next year). This arose in the context of wildly alarmist estimates of the number who have travelled from Eastern Europe following the accession of ten new members in May 2004.

Predictably Labour immediately followed suit when the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry denied that there would be an 'open door' and hinted strongly that the Government was concerned about a threat to public services, fuelling public anxiety about immigrants taking jobs and housing and filling up schools. John Reid then called for a 'mature debate' (code for bashing immigration). The Home Office said that since the last enlargement 447,000 people have come to the UK from Eastern Europe. (At the time it guessed that the total would not exceed 13,000, so ministers are understandably reluctant to make any predictions about future numbers.) Other sources have doubted even the Home Office estimate, and guesses have ranged up to a million.

Bulgaria and Romania have less than half the population of the ten countries which joined in 2004. Unlike the main source since 2004, Poland, they have few connections in the UK (by contrast there has always been a large Polish population here), and their people are much more likely to head for southern Europe. However they have high unemployment and much lower economic prosperity than eastern Europe (about half the production per head of Poland, for example).

Actually the government is divided, and the facts are more complicated than many people will admit. Recent reports from the Office of National Statistics do not bear out the worst predictions of doom about our population being swamped by immigrants. The ONS says that most of those coming are only here for short stays. If you take long-term stayers (5 years or more) we are actually *losing* more people than we gain. It seems likely that the underlying trend of our population is just as

likely to be down as up. The ONS data show that this current influx is almost certainly quite different from the previous postwar inflows from the Caribbean and south Asia, which are (of course) the precedents which those who argue for quotas are thinking about. Eastern Europeans who come here are likely to be young, single, hardworking, likely to pay taxes, very unlikely to need to access benefits and unlikely to settle permanently. (This is a painful contrast to the 195,000 Brits in Spain, who are old, economically unproductive and already putting heavy pressure on the Spanish health services. Not to mention the gang warfare they bring.)

The ONS figures also show that the new trend of short-term stays is strengthening. In 1995 the proportion of entrants planning to stay under 2 years was 36%; in 2004 it was 50%.

It would therefore be better to talk about 'guest workers' than 'immigrants', since the latter term has become degraded by the media and politicians.

Meanwhile the government's ambivalence derives firstly from the fear of losing votes to the Tories, of course, but also from the conviction that the guest workers are increasingly vital to our

economy. Overwhelmingly they work and pay taxes. They also fill up jobs locals are unwilling to do. One strongly suspects also that the government hopes they will keep wages down (though, with wages nationally rising at 4%, there is not much sign of this so far). Fears that they cause unemployment have been increased by the recent rises in unemployment in the UK, but if you look closely at the figures the argument doesn't hold up: unemployment is rising equally across UK regions, whereas most of the guest workers are in the south east. Moreover the number of people in jobs in the UK is at an all-time high.

Immigration is a difficult political problem. But instead of rushing to compete with the Tories in pandering to anti-immigration anxiety it would be useful if the government, just this once, exercised leadership. Strangely enough, statements out of the Home Office (as opposed to John Reid) have tried to do this. Unfortunately nobody seems to be listening. [JC]



FIGURES

Emigration: There are between 4 and 5 million UK passport holders living permanently abroad: notably 600,000 in Australia, 500,000 in the US, 200,000 in France and 195,000 in Spain. (There are, of course, infinitely more of British descent.) 235,000 more left in 2004 (a record).

Net immigration: Numbers entering in 2004 were 226,000 bigger than numbers emigrating. Of these, 193,000 planned to leave in less than 2 years, 54,000 in less than 5; leaving a long-term *decline* in the UK population of 21,000.

Influx 2004 and 2007: Combined populations of the 10 entrants in 2004 totalled 74m. Bulgaria's population is 7.7m, Romania's 21.6: together 40% of the 2004 total.

Jobs the guest workers take: 155,000 in manufacturing and distribution, 45,000 in agriculture and food processing, 41,000 in catering and hospitality, 13,000 care workers, 11,000 building workers, plus 73,000 other including 685 doctors, 310 dentists and 25 lawyers.

Geographical: Biggest region East Anglia (65,000). The South West took 37,000.