



How you can help

The need for RSG's services is constantly increasing, and new kinds of need (e.g. the women's project) are being identified. But financial support is far from certain, and we are asking members and supporters to help us with the funding drive required.

Across the nation, charities are having a hard time. Because so much of the work of redressing society's inequalities rests on charities, there is never enough money to go round. Local charities like RSG benefit enormously from the generosity of the local community, both in terms of money and in terms of the contribution of volunteer workers, whose efforts make charities so effective an instrument.

But volunteers work better if there is a solid administrative framework, and this is very difficult to provide without salaried workers. Paying salaries, however, gets you into big money and this is where the problem starts.

Recently the problem has got worse. This is partly because of the reorganisation of the national lottery, which took months to do: months during which grants were not made and many charities ran into problems. It's also however because there is a more and more bureaucratic climate in the world of those bodies which have traditionally provided financial support for charities. There is a much more hard-nosed approach to outcomes: these days it can take many hours of work to make an application, and, later, hours, days or weeks to provide an explanation of how the money has been spent. All this time is subtracted from the resources the charity can devote to its prime purpose. (Your administrator isn't out there helping support volunteers: he or she is in a back room sweating over a database and filling in forms.)

RSG has been hit in both these ways: we

don't yet know whether our £257,000 application to the Big Lottery will be successful, and we are struggling to find the resources to find alternatives.

There is a third problem. The government itself provides quite a lot of the funding for many charities (including RSG, which has benefited from Home Office grants). However, government funding comes with a very big health warning. There seems to be a greater readiness to fund start-ups than to sustain existing and successful projects. There is also currently a move towards specific projects, rather than the maintenance of core funding.

RSG is an established charity with a first-class record. We are productive, effective and (to put it crudely) cheap. The need for our services has never been so great as it is now, as Annette's and Jenny's reports make very clear. If there were any government body trying to do what we do (and since the withdrawal of NASS there isn't) it would be enormously expensive, probably inflexible and likely to be hit by inappropriate targets and – in the medium term – politically-motivated cuts.

However, refugees are not a popular cause. Their situation is too often distorted in national press reports, and the government is unwilling to admit the scale of the problems refugees face. So organisations like RSG are always likely to have to fight their corner particularly hard.

HOW CAN YOU HELP?

Well, obviously, any money you donate or raise is welcome. This is particularly true since individual donations (unlike most grants) are not limited to particular spending categories. (And they are particularly useful if we can reclaim the tax on them.)

But in addition, *any expertise you have* is much needed, and needed urgently. If you have any experience in fundraising: if you can write bids, or evaluate past performances, if you know any funder likely to be sympathetic – please get in touch. Please help.

Annual general meeting

This was held at St Sidwell's Community Centre on 5th October. Fran gave a brief account of the year's work and thanked all those who had contributed (names were mentioned but too many to fit in here). It was noticeable that as time passed the kind of issues thrown up by Exeter asylum seekers and refugees were changing, with corresponding need for RSG to develop new expertise. We also need to liaise even more closely with the refugee community.

Several trustees resigned (Liz Baker, Ian Miller, Bahram Raad and Hussein Razi). New trustees were appointed as follows: Gholam Gholami, Ali Mozavi, John Stokes. Fran Jenkin was re-elected as chair and she, Kate Hannan and Colin Stiff were re-elected as trustees.

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REFUGEE SUPPORT GROUP DEVON

www.rsgdevon.org.uk

Wat Tyler House
King William St
Exeter EX4 6PD

Telephone:
01392 682185

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 15th November 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

Science success

(Anonymous contributor)

A young Kurdish scientist who arrived in the UK in February 2004 and was dispersed to Exeter following his application for political asylum, has been awarded £14,000 by the Engineering Postgraduate Scientific Research Council to complete a Master of Science Programme in nano-technology and nano-electronics.

When I asked him (I'll call him X) how he knew about the award, he answered: 'I found out about it on the internet, filled out the application and sent it off.' It may sound like a simple success story, but it wasn't quite like that. This is what happened to him after he left Exeter.

When X, a university lecturer from Iran, was granted refugee status in 2005 he left Exeter for A. He thought he would more opportunities in a bigger town and he was hoping to do a PhD there. Whatever opportunities there may have been, X did not find them. What is more, there was no organisation like the RSG which could help him. He was very keen to improve his English with a view to doing a

PhD, once he had saved up enough money. However he discovered that he did not qualify for any free classes at the local college as his English was too advanced. As he needed money he shelved his plans for further education and found a job in an optical factory, doing night shifts. Most of his colleagues were foreigners with very little English and he felt his English gradually deteriorating. Meanwhile his wife had joined him from Iran. As she did not feel happy to be left alone at night X asked the factory whether they had any work for her. The factory understood the situation and gave her some work so they could be together. However she found the night shifts (midnight to 8 am) increasingly difficult to cope with and after about three months she left the job. X carried on for another two days but then gave up his work as well when his wife fell ill. Both of them went to the job centre to find work but failed to get a new job. As the pressure on X's wife increased to find work she felt it was better to go back to Iran for a while. Whenever he was not looking for work X went to the library to search the internet for opportunities to re-enter a university programme. This is how he came across the EPSRC Master of Science Programme.

One week into the programme he is very excited about being back

in a world which he feared he would never be part of anymore.

He particularly enjoys spending time in the laboratory, doing practical experiments and tests. In Iran the emphasis appears to be on theory and the practical work is not given as much priority. X's wife will rejoin him in two weeks' time and will try to find a day time job. In a years' time, when X will have completed the EPSCR course, he is hoping to fulfil his dream of doing a PhD.

When I asked X, in what way he had benefited most from contact with the RSG in Exeter he said that the English classes had helped him in particular. The informality of the classes enabled him to practise his speaking and listening skills. He was moved by the personal commitment of the RSG volunteers, most of whom had busy lives but still found time to go out in the evening to help asylum seekers and refugees improve their English. 'Really amazing' was how X. described it. He also benefited enormously from the help he received from his English teachers at Exeter College. He would like to thank everyone involved.

I asked him how he felt when he first arrived in the UK. 'When I arrived in Maidstone I was sad and worried because I did not know what would happen to me and my family in the future. I didn't even know what people's behaviour would be to me. It was a strange world for me. How to talk to people? How could I explain my situation to people especially with my poor English language? When I was thinking about this situation I suddenly saw a grey squirrel. It was so beautiful. I had never seen such a beautiful animal so close to me. The squirrel didn't have any fear because of me. After that my mind changed and I got some hope because I felt that in this country animals live in peace and happiness. So perhaps this would be true for humans too. This is why I felt safe. For me it was the best welcome to my new country.'

Committee report

The RSG management committee met on 16th August, 13th September and 18th October. The AGM was on 5th October.

They received reports from Annette, the project co-ordinator, and Susan and (now) Jenny, the refugee integration workers, which indicated that RSG's work was more and more needed and our activities were expanding all the time.

Funding and accounts

Funding is discussed on this month's front page; but particular regret was expressed at the ending of grants for the Purposeful Activities and Refugee Integration projects (both funded by the Home Office). Both these had been very productive (and the integration project was still in being) but we would have to find a funder to enable us to continue them.

In the mean time our core funding had not been renewed and

there was uncertainty about whether we would be able to obtain renewal from the Big Lottery.

It was also agreed that our accounting system needed attention. Zen Bailey had made heroic efforts and the situation had improved but more work still needed to be done.

Constitution, policy and procedures

Work was ongoing aimed at

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Jenny takes over ...



Jenny Stephens writes: I have volunteered in the office for over two years and was really pleased to be asked if I would cover maternity leave for Susan Loughran as the Refugee Integration Worker [Stop Press: the arrival of osep]. The work involves, in particular, dealing with issues and enquiries around employment and training.

I worked alongside Susan for eight days in July and August. In between the busy open office times, Susan showed me the systems she had in place for recording and accessing relevant information about English (ESOL) courses in Exeter, other training opportunities (eg vocational courses, computer courses, RSG English and Citizenship), the Driving Lesson scheme with BSM; writing CVs; job opportunities/vacancies; up to date information about how the Job Centre operates and how to register as unemployed.

I also deal in other benefit information and information about useful organisations and contacts.

Susan also gave me basic training in Excel to complete spreadsheets for logging all enquiries to RSG relevant to the Integration Project (training and employment enquiries).

Colnbrook protest

Protests intensify as evidence of unacceptable conditions at Colnbrook detention centre mounts

Duncan Atkinson writes: An inquiry into conditions at Colnbrook detention centre has been demanded by the Conservative party. 49 detainees received treatment for self-harm in the first half of this year, with 461 classified as being 'at risk' over the same period.

While the party line is still one of reducing the proportion of asylum seekers and immigrants admitted to the UK, the human concern displayed by this request is very refreshing. The shadow immigration minister expressed annoyance that he had to wait two months for information. 'Is someone trying to cover up this rash of attempted suicides?' A Home Office statement claimed that instances 'range from the very minor to serious which require medical treatment. The majority are at the lower end of the scale'. Of course, 'minor self harm' would scarcely be viewed as such outside a detention centre, particularly in view of repeated incidents.

The management of Colnbrook claims on their website: 'We pride ourselves on providing the best possible environment'. In April this year more than 100 detainees went on hunger strike there, claiming that detention was 'only lawful ... for a reasonable period of time ... [and] if the Home Secretary exercises reasonable expedience'. They are generally detained up to six months, some as many as eighteen.

A Pakistani family has been denied any guarantee that they will not be deported before or during a series of operations for their daughter. Their asylum appeal on humanitarian grounds was denied because Aqsa Altaf, who has severe inherited rickets, 'managed to walk around the hearing room ... unaided'. The adjudicator continued; 'The claim that Aqsa is completely disabled has been made in an attempt to embellish (her mother's) claim'. A more recent claim, now Aqsa has to use a wheelchair, was also refused. The family's lawyer, John Nicholson, has stated, 'I don't think they considered the medical reports'.

Mrs Altaf arrived in the country in 2004, after she was subjected to do-

mestic violence because she was blamed for her daughter's disability. There is a campaign in their support in their home community of Salford, Greater Manchester. Their MP, Hazel Blears, has acknowledged the genuineness of Aqsa's disability.

REFERENCE

See 'Let Samina Altaf and her children stay' on www.workersliberty.org or for general background 'The End of the Road' on www.ncadc.org.uk. Or email samina.altafcampaign@google-mail.com, or telephone Denise McDowell on 07834 023 146.

Committee report (continued from page 2)

redrafting the constitution and drafting policies and procedures which would reflect recent developments in RSG's activities. We needed more trustees, too.

The emergency fund

Although most people were being very restrained in applying for emergency help the fund was badly needed and ways of finding more cash were discussed. This was where individual donations were particularly useful, as they were unrestricted.

The allotment

This was a real success, thanks to the efforts of Gholam Gholami and Pat Comery. We probably needed a good source of manure ...

The 'women's project'

Fran Jenkin reported on RSG's new drive to extend our activities to helping women refugees. An initial meeting had been very encouraging: refugees had expressed their needs, including English teaching, and RSG volunteers had expressed theirs, including being taught how to dance and how to cook Afghan rice. There was a need for more services including home visits, though everyone realised how sensitive this issue might be. We now needed to look for a funder.

Anti-torture report slams Britain

A recent report from the Committee for the Prevention of Torture (CPT) of the Council of Europe has criticised Britain's treatment of persons detained under anti-terrorism laws. The government's policy of imprisonment without trial was declared illegal by the House of Lords in 2005. Subsequently detainees were re-detained under new-style 'detention orders'

'P' is an Algerian who had had both his forearms amputated after an explosion in a bus during the civil war in Algeria. Released from prison after the House of Lords declared his detention illegal, P, with no hands or forearms, was then confined to a flat with no adaptations of any kind to allow for his disability. Among other problems, in particular he could not use the telephone provided, and so was totally isolated except for two one-hour visits each day by carers. The Home Office did not give permission for him to continue studies he had started while in Belmarsh and the police had retained his identity papers so that he was unable to register with a library or dentist. Like other detainees on control orders, he lost contact with friends because they were unwilling to be subjected to the intrusive examinations into their private lives required by the control order.

The CPT found that he was showing signs of 'a sense of hopelessness and abandon ... the flat was in a state of disarray and, with no furniture or decoration and strewn with rubbish, presented a bleak environment'. A psychiatrist reported that he was severely depressed and anxious, in considerable distress and despair, with symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder [PTSD] such as numbing, re-experiencing, intrusive memories, arousal, avoidance, irritability, alienation and detachment [all well-known features of people who have been through unbearable experiences, as the authorities know perfectly well]. The depression could not be treated as long as the restrictions of the control orders remained in place. Further, the risk of self-harm and even suicide was significant ...

'X' is a Palestinian, who was granted asylum in Britain in 1995. Like 'P' he suffers from PTSD, but unlike 'P' he was actually officially diagnosed with the condition. He was at first placed in Broadmoor,

which CPT visitors 'did not consider clinically appropriate for someone suffering from severe PTSD'. After the Lords judgement he was removed to accommodation in London under a control order, with his family. He was made to wear a tag. His condition deteriorated and his family left him. He attempted suicide and then developed delusions (not unusual in his medical condition), including a belief that the tag on his leg was infecting him. He refused to wear it and was temporarily imprisoned at Brixton. He was then permitted to leave it off but only on condition that he made additional telephone calls to the monitoring company. One of these had to be between 3 and 4 a.m., which prevented him getting a full night's sleep. (Deprivation of sleep is, of course, a well-known feature of 'torture lite' programmes.) This was contrary to medical advice. By now he was regularly trying to harm himself. The CPT warned that 'it would be unwise to dismiss the episodes of self-harm as mere manipulation [the line taken by the Home Office]. They were more likely symptoms of the desperation caused by the various restrictions and the increasing hopelessness felt by 'X' about his life, accentuated no doubt by the departure of his wife and children who could not abide by the restrictions the control order placed upon them, combined with his mood swings [another classic symptom of PTSD] ... In November 2005 'X' was seen again by the two psychiatrists in the delegation. Despite the return of his family, his withdrawal (evident in his apathy, emotional numbness and sense of hopelessness) was symptomatic of someone with a serious depression'.

'P' and 'X' are detainees under the Anti-terrorism Act 2001. Both received asylum in this country. Neither has been tried for terrorism. However both were 'certified' by the Home Secretary under the Act and put in Belmarsh. Both were then trans-

ferred to Broadmoor because of their health problems. After the House of Lords declared their detention unlawful in December 2005 they were both made subject to the new-style orders in March last year.

Examples of mistreatment

'P' and 'X' were both singled out in the CPT report as examples of the way detainees are treated in the UK system.

What seems clear is that while the government is probably justified in seeking ways of controlling people it has good reason to think may be dangerous, but who cannot be proved guilty in a court of law, what is actually happening is that the detainees are being mistreated in a way which, even if they were proved guilty, amounts to cruel and unusual punishment. This is not the mark of a truly civilised society. It may be that the government hopes that if detainees are badly enough treated they will choose to go back to their home countries, where they may be tortured. At least two have already done so. Similar motivations may be behind its treatment of detained asylum-seeker children, who can by no stretch of the imagination be seen as threats to our national security.

It is possible however that the government thinks mistreatment is in accord with public opinion. Insofar as the public is aware of it, it backs up attempts by leading politicians to look tough on immigration and terrorism. Recent comments by the Lord Chancellor, Lord Falconer, show once again that the government has a concept of British liberties and the role of the courts which is very far from the historical mainstream.

We should be ashamed of, and frightened by, cases like those of 'P' and 'X'. This is not because we approve of men who plan atrocities (if that is indeed what they have done) but because such cases are symptoms of a cancer at the very heart of British democracy. [JC]