



# FACT PACK

## Welcome to Refugee Week 2008

Refugee Week is a unique opportunity to celebrate the positive contributions that refugees and asylum seekers make to the UK and to promote understanding about why people seek sanctuary.

Since it began in 1998, Refugee Week has developed into a high-profile event that challenges negative stereotypes of refugees and asylum seekers and brings people together on a national scale. Last year over 450 Refugee Week events were held throughout the UK.

We hope you find this pack useful. If you are planning an event, you could use some of the information to make a display or could include some of the facts and figures in an introductory talk.

Thank you for your interest in Refugee Week. Let's make 2008 bigger and better than ever before!

This pack includes the following:

- . **Who is a refugee?**
- . **Facts and figures**
- . **Key issues facing asylum seekers and refugees**
- . **Additional resources**

## 1. Who is a refugee?

The 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees was the first international law to define the term 'refugee' and to outline how refugees should be treated.

The Convention defines a refugee as someone who is forced to leave their country and seeks protection in another country because of:

"...a well-founded fear of persecution in their own country for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion."

It was drafted in response to the horrors of the Holocaust, when fleeing Jewish refugees were denied entry by many countries, and because of the millions of people who became refugees in Europe during and after World War II.

One hundred and thirty four countries have since signed the agreement stating that anyone, anywhere, who is forced to flee persecution in their own country will have their claim to asylum heard fairly and receive protection if they need it.

### **Asylum Seekers and Internally Displaced People**

When a refugee arrives in a new country, they are known as an asylum seeker until they are granted refugee status. If someone has fled their home in fear of their life but has not crossed the borders of their country, they are known as an internally displaced person.

Imagine how you would feel if tomorrow you had to flee your home and family in fear of your own safety. Who would you turn to? Where would you go? How would you cope?



## **2. Facts and Figures**

### **UK**

According to the Home Office, in 2007 there were 23,430 new applications for asylum in the UK excluding dependants.

Initial decisions by the Home Office recognised 16% of applicants as refugees and granted them asylum, and granted 10% Extended Leave to Remain, Humanitarian Protection or Discretionary Leave.

The majority of applicants in 2007 - 73% - were refused asylum at initial decision. However, as in previous years, there was a high success rate at appeals, with 23% of appeals allowed.

In 2007 the top five countries of origin of asylum applicants in the UK were Afghanistan, Iran, China, Iraq and Eritrea.

Refugees' reasons for fleeing often include war, a volatile political situation, a totalitarian regime, human rights abuses, persecution or a lack of safety.

### **World context**

The UK hosts a small fraction of the world's refugees.

By the end of 2006 there were 9.9 million refugees in the world, the highest in five years, according to the UNHCR. This was partly due to a rise in Iraqis seeking refuge in Jordan and the Syrian Arab Republic.

According to the UNHCR, the vast majority of refugees are sheltering in the developing world.

As of the end of 2006, four out of 10 refugees were hosted in countries in Central Asia, South West Asia, North Africa and the Middle East. One quarter of all refugees were hosted by Africa, while Europe hosted 18%, the Americas 10% and Asia and the Pacific hosted 9%.

Pakistan continued to be the country with the single largest number of refugees followed by Iran, with both countries together hosting one out of five, or 20%, of the world's refugees by the end of 2006.

### **Industrialised world**

The UK ranked eighth in the top ten countries hosting refugees at the end of 2006, behind other industrialised countries such as Germany and the United States.

The UK is home to about 3% of the world's total number of refugees and asylum seekers (about 302,000 people).

Germany hosted 6% of the world's refugees and asylum seekers and the United States hosted 8.5% of the world's total, according to the UNHCR.

## **Applications**

The UK was the fourth largest recipient of applications in the world in 2006, behind Canada, Sweden, France and the US.

### **3. Key issues facing refugees and asylum seekers**

#### **Threats to the 1951 Refugee Convention**

People fleeing persecution find it increasingly difficult to seek the protection of the Refugee Convention as European governments progressively introduce measures that prevent people from entering the UK if they do not have a legal route to do so. There is no visa that allows someone to enter the UK legally for the purposes of claiming asylum.

Examples of these measures introduced by the UK and other EU governments include: imposing fines on airlines and other carriers for people without permission to enter whom they bring into the UK; imposing visa restrictions on refugee-producing countries; and posting immigration officers overseas to prevent refugees from boarding planes to travel to the UK.

The UK and other European governments are taking similar measures which prevent refugees from arriving in Europe and seeking the protection they need. There have even been reports of armed warships patrolling the Mediterranean and unmanned spy planes monitoring the seas around the Canaries seeking to prevent 'irregular migration.'

Many refugees fleeing persecution now find it impossible to reach safety, and are denied the chance to apply for protection, to which they are entitled under the 1951 Refugee Convention. Others are forced into highly dangerous journeys.

#### **Uncertainty**

Those asylum seekers that do manage to reach the UK are treated increasingly harshly. The government has made it a criminal offence, punishable by up to two years in prison, to arrive in the UK without valid travel documents.

Increasing restrictions on legal aid have also made it much more difficult for asylum seekers fleeing persecution to obtain quality legal advice and representation in order to get a full and fair hearing of their case.

Most asylum seekers are prohibited from working. Those who are awaiting a decision on their asylum applications cannot work until they have waited over a year for an initial decision on their case, and meanwhile are eligible for benefits at only 70% of income support, the benefit for those on low incomes. Currently, those on asylum support receive £32.80 a week for those aged 18-24, and £41.40 a week for over-25s.

Increasing numbers of refused asylum seekers are being left destitute, as those who have had their asylum claim and appeal rejected often have state support withdrawn.

Despite the failure of their claims many come from countries to which they are fearful of returning and to which the government is unable practically to return them.

Thus significant numbers of asylum seekers from countries that can include Zimbabwe, Iraq, Afghanistan, Democratic Republic of Congo and Somalia, live in destitution as they are without any means of support and denied the right to work.

Those who are willing but unable to return to their country of origin are provided with meagre levels of 'hard case' support. This support is given in the form of vouchers only which tend to stigmatise their users and which are extremely restricted in their use.

Many others do not want to sign up for 'voluntary' return. For many, the prospect of being homeless in the UK, unable to work legally or access benefits is preferable to returning to the country from which they were forced to flee.

The government also has taken powers to allow it to remove support from families refusing to co-operate with the process of removal, with the threat of taking their children into care.

Even where support is maintained for families with children, a 2008 report from the children charity Barnardo's found that about 100,000 have been condemned to living in intolerable accommodation and poverty for years to come. These children are caught up in an asylum processing backlog that under the Home Office's own plans it will not clear until 2011. These families are impoverished because their parents are not allowed to work while waiting for their cases to be resolved. Families live on incomes below benefit levels, in damp and unsafe housing, with many suffering racial abuse.

### **Healthcare**

Restrictions on healthcare for asylum seekers whose claims have been refused will mean that many destitute people are denied treatment or are afraid to seek healthcare for fear of being made to pay for it.

Asylum seekers whose applications and appeals have been refused are not allowed NHS hospital treatment free of charge, though GPs have the discretion to accept them as patients.

They can only get free treatment under the NHS in certain circumstances – for example if they need to be treated in an Accident and Emergency department.

### **Detention**

Every year in the UK, the Government locks up around 2000 asylum-seeking children damaging their mental and physical health.

In the UK, asylum seekers, including children, can be detained at any stage of the asylum process. According to UNHCR, the UK detains more people for longer periods and with less judicial supervision than any comparable country in Europe.

Despite criticism from human rights organisations, the UK government does not publish the annual numbers of asylum seekers it detains, and will not disclose the length of time they are detained. Amnesty International estimates that in 2004 over 25,000 asylum seekers, including women and children, were detained.

Many believe that such detention of asylum seekers represents a violation of a fundamental human right: Article 9 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights states that “no one shall be subject to arbitrary arrest, detention or exile”.

### **Unsafe returns**

Asylum seekers whose claims the Home Office rejects are commonly returned to countries where they will not be safe - including countries where there are widespread human rights violations or where there is war and ongoing conflict.

Although a country may be deemed ‘safe’ by a government, refused asylum seekers returned there may still have a “well-founded fear of persecution” or be otherwise at risk.

In addition the UK government is negotiating agreements with states with records of serious human rights abuses, including the widespread practice of torture, in order to remove people to those countries. Agreements include diplomatic assurances that returnees will not be tortured and treated inhumanely on return. The UK has already concluded agreements with Jordan and Libya.

But there is much concern that these assurances will simply not be respected.

### **Media hostility**

‘New terror as ambush gangs target our cars and caravans,’ said the People in a story claiming that ‘scores of violent asylum seekers’ had overrun a French port town. ‘Seventy-three ways you can sneak into Britain,’ wrote the Daily Star, warning readers that action is needed to stop ‘hundreds of asylum seekers’ from getting into England.

In another story the Daily Star claimed that ‘jet set asylum seekers’ were flown home at a cost of £3,000 to the British government. In fact the Home Office’s scheme to support asylum seekers who voluntarily return to their country of origin means that up to £3,000 is spent on helping people settle in their home country. This scheme is three to four times cheaper than enforced removal.

The media have a big impact on public perception of asylum seekers and refugees and negative coverage can have a powerful effect.

It can lead to policy decisions that make it difficult for asylum seekers to enter the UK and increased hostility towards those who do make it.

In October 2003, the Press Complaints Commission issued a guidance note for reporting about asylum seekers and refugees warning of “the danger that inaccurate, misleading, or distorted reporting may generate an atmosphere of fear and hostility that is not borne out by the facts.”

In 2007 the Refugee Council successfully lodged a complaint against the Daily Express, which used the term ‘criminal asylum seekers’ to describe what were in fact foreign criminals awaiting deportation from the UK.

Whilst national newspapers generally focus on broad political issues, regional newspapers are sometimes more able to cover stories about individuals and reflect the views of the communities they live in.

In Leeds, the Yorkshire Evening Post reported the story of an Iranian table tennis champion and history teacher who fled his home country in fear of his life – and was eventually granted permission to stay in the UK. The story showed how Frank Stevens, as he renamed himself in the UK, had been imprisoned by the Iranian authorities and had to leave the country – highlighting his contribution towards UK life and integration into the region.

Accurate reporting of refugee issues is being recognised. In December 2007 the Mayor of London held 'Reporting Asylum - the local press awards.' The London paper won an award for its profile of Peter Paduh, who fled the war in Bosnia aged 15 and now runs an award-winning computer recycling business. Meanwhile Scotland held the Refugee Week Scottish Media Awards, which were judged both by professional journalists and refugees.

A report published by ICAR, the Information Centre about Asylum and Refugees in the UK, in March 2007 concluded that press coverage of asylum has improved since the Press Complaints Commission introduced new guidance for journalists in 2003.

But the report also said that journalists concentrated on showing the ‘chaos’ of the asylum system, and not highlighting the need to protect vulnerable people.

## **Sources**

Information Centre about Asylum and Refugees (ICAR)  
[www.icar.org.uk](http://www.icar.org.uk)

Home Office Asylum Statistics  
[www.homeoffice.gov.uk/rds/immigration1.html](http://www.homeoffice.gov.uk/rds/immigration1.html)

United Nations Refugee Agency (UNHCR)  
2006 Global Trends: Refugees, Asylum seekers, Returnees, Internally Displaced and Stateless Persons (revised 16 July 2007)  
<http://www.unhcr.org/statistics/STATISTICS/4676a71d4.pdf>

'Fleeing the Fighting: How conflict drives the search for asylum in refugee-producing countries' (June 2004)  
[www.amnesty.org.uk/images/ul/F/FINAL\\_REPORT14\\_June.pdf](http://www.amnesty.org.uk/images/ul/F/FINAL_REPORT14_June.pdf)

Asylum and migration: a review of Home Office Statistics  
[www.nao.org.uk/pn/03-04/0304625.htm](http://www.nao.org.uk/pn/03-04/0304625.htm)

'Like Any Other Child?'  
[http://www.barnardos.org.uk/like\\_any\\_other\\_child\\_asylum\\_report08\\_summary.pdf](http://www.barnardos.org.uk/like_any_other_child_asylum_report08_summary.pdf)

Asylum Seekers and Refugees: Department of Health – policy and guidance  
<http://www.dh.gov.uk/en/Policyandguidance/International/AsylumseekersAndrefugees/index.htm>

'Reporting Asylum and Refugee Issues' – MediaWise  
[http://www.mediawise.org.uk/display\\_page.php?id=657](http://www.mediawise.org.uk/display_page.php?id=657)

'Media Image, Community Impact' – Greater London Authority (GLA)  
[www.london.gov.uk/mayor/refugees/docs/mici\\_exec\\_summary.rtf](http://www.london.gov.uk/mayor/refugees/docs/mici_exec_summary.rtf)

'Credit to the Nation: Refugee Contributions to the UK'  
[www.refugeecouncil.org.uk/publications](http://www.refugeecouncil.org.uk/publications)

## **Links**

Refugee Week  
[www.refugeeweek.org.uk](http://www.refugeeweek.org.uk)

United Nations Agency for Refugees (UNHCR)  
[www.unhcr.ch](http://www.unhcr.ch)

Refugee Council  
[www.refugeecouncil.org.uk](http://www.refugeecouncil.org.uk)

Amnesty International  
[www.amnesty.org.uk](http://www.amnesty.org.uk)

Save the Children  
[www.savethechildren.org.uk](http://www.savethechildren.org.uk)

Barnardo's  
<http://www.barnardos.org.uk>

Refugee Action  
[www.refugee-action.org.uk](http://www.refugee-action.org.uk)

MediaWise  
[www.presswise.org.uk](http://www.presswise.org.uk)

Refugees Asylum Seekers and Media (RAM) project  
[www.ramproject.org.uk](http://www.ramproject.org.uk)

**REFUGEE WEEK 2008**  
**16 – 22 JUNE**

**[www.refugeeweek.org.uk](http://www.refugeeweek.org.uk)**