

Nottingham & Nottinghamshire Refugee Forum

WORKING WITH REFUGEES
AND ASYLUM SEEKERS

Jubilee Family Feast



Rain couldn't dampen spirits at the Refugee Family Feast on 'Jubilee' Wednesday. The barbecue at the Hungerhill allotments was organised by Eco-works and Stonebridge City Farm.

More changes to asylum system

The Home office White Paper *Secure Borders, Safe Haven – Integration with Diversity in Modern Britain* is the fourth major shake-up of the asylum system in less than 10 years. Among the proposals are the following:

The voucher scheme has been abolished. In its place come smart cards, which will enable asylum seekers to obtain cash from Post Offices. There has been a small increase in the amount, but the money is still only 70 per cent of Income Support. There are concerns as to whether the smart cards will be used to discriminate against asylum seekers. They should not have to be used in order to access services such as visiting

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NNRF launches RAF Newton campaign

NNRF is launching a campaign against the siting of an accommodation centre at RAF Newton.

Our objection is not that Newton itself is not suitable (though we sympathise with local people's concerns about the impact of a large centre in a place with few facilities), but rather, we object to accommodation centres as a whole. We believe that people seeking asylum in Britain, who have fled from desperate situations in their own countries, need to be able to live their lives as normally as possible. Living in large accommodation centres will:

- Separate them from the support of local communities and organisations that have

done much to welcome previous arrivals.

- Restrict their freedom of movement – for example, it will be difficult or impossible to visit friends because residents will have to sleep in the centres every night without exception. Indeed it will be difficult for them to travel at all as transport links will be infrequent or non-existent and expensive.
- All facilities will be provided on site, so those living in the centres will be effectively segregated. Many will eventually be granted leave to remain in Britain and will have been denied opportunities to integrate which are given when, for

example, children are educated in local schools and adults learn English in local colleges.

- Living together in large groups away from urban centres will mean that asylum seekers will be highly conspicuous and a target for suspicion and racism. There are already people talking about the crime rate rising, and the British National Party have seized the opportunity to leaflet the village.

Although there have been problems with the dispersal of asylum seekers across Britain, there is much that is positive about

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RAF Newton

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it and the people of Nottingham have been generally welcoming to their new neighbours. If the resources that will be put into the accommodation centres could be devoted to local areas, those problems could be dealt with, and asylum seekers could be allowed to live with greater dignity and privacy while awaiting decisions on their applications. •

More changes

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a hospital.

Dispersal will continue but the Government is piloting a new system of large accommodation centres. Four such centres, each housing 750 asylum seekers, have been planned. One centre is to be at RAF Newton, a former air base near Bingham. Alongside accommodation centres will run induction and removal centres.

There are also proposals for a **Highly Skilled Migrant Programme**, which will enable workers such as doctors, dentists and scientists to obtain work permits in the UK, and for a **Citizenship Pledge** for people who have made it to the end of the process and become British citizens.

Border controls are to be tightened by the use of more immigration officers and visa requirements for certain countries.

There is some good news in these proposals, mainly the abolition of vouchers, but NNRF is concerned about others, in particular, the plan to house people seeking asylum in large centres in the middle of the countryside. Although the pilot schemes will run alongside the existing dispersal system, if the government thinks they "work," then in future, all asylum seekers will be housed in this way. •

An Iranian woman's story

The following is an edited extract of an interview with a young woman forced to leave her native Iran. She asked that her name be withheld.

Q So why did you and your husband leave Iran?

A My husband sometimes said some things about the government – to friends or customers – while he was working in his computer company. The police came and erased the computers and took them away.

Q Just because your husband happened to voice his opinion?

A Yes. He wasn't in government. He wasn't an academic. He's just a normal person like you or me. The government said they'd found something in his computer and accused him of copying it for young people. But this wasn't true. Then, the day before my husband was due to appear in court some government people – 'Hezbollah' – came to our house and broke everything. They said "You must say this in court tomorrow. You must say that in court tomorrow". They punished my husband in front of me and my daughter. They told him he would go to jail and that I was also in danger.

Q When did you decide to leave?

A Some friends advised my husband not to go to court. When he didn't appear the Hezbollah came back and took everything in our house. Our friends helped us go into hiding in a village outside Tehran – those friends were later arrested. Nobody has heard what has happened to them.

Q And how did you get out of Iran?

A Oh! *(she laughs and covers her face)* It was horrible! Horrible! First my husband left on his own. The people who helped us said it was too dangerous to take families. After one month my daughter and I left too.

Q Which country did you go to first?

A To Turkey. In a lorry. And then on a plane in Bosnia. Then by lorry, by car, by boat to Slovenia and Croatia. It was really dangerous. We were in a big group – only two or three other women. My daughter couldn't run the same as them – they left us and three others behind. It was very dark. We were in this forest in Croatia. We were there for almost fifteen days.

Q You were lost?

A Yes. And running, running... This was in January 2001. It was very cold. Our food was finished. We didn't have water. No bath. No toilet...

Q So what happened?

A Some people found us and again we had to give them money.

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Q When did you arrive in Britain?

A We arrived at Heathrow one year ago. We stayed in London for one month and then we came to Nottingham. I am sad when I hear some English people say things about refugees, that we're coming here for a 'good life' – they're right, we're not from this country and yet the government spend a lot of money on us, for the NHS, for college, for housing. Everything. But it isn't our fault that we are here.

Q How has your life been in Nottingham?

A We have been moved five times in Nottingham in one year. It's difficult for my daughter. In some ways our situation is much worse than in Iran. We had a good car, good house. Everything was normal and good – except for the end when our lives were in danger. My life! A beautiful life! *(she laughs...)*

Richard Goodson

Notes from our chair

The NNRF sent a speaker to the Nottingham Trades Council's annual 'Mayday' event. We are pleased that Huda, a Sudanese democracy and women's rights campaigner, agreed to speak for us (part of her speech is reproduced below).

International workers' day is about solidarity across linguistic, national and cultural borders, and about recognising that – whatever our differences – we are part of the same global community. This sense of solidarity lies at the heart of asylum support work, and is one reason we are critical of the current Government's approach to asylum.

In particular, we see real dangers with 'accommodation centres' - essentially a system of open incarceration. Not least, they add weight to the idea that asylum seekers are undesirables who should be contained and separated. To deny the racist implications of segregation – as the Home Secretary has – is extraordinarily naïve. Rather than going down the incarceration road, the Government should be supporting and extending local efforts currently being made to integrate asylum seekers.

In other respects too we remain critical. For example, the Government is keen to increase the speed of asylum decision making, and this is one of the selling points behind the new centres. However, it is one thing to talk about a more efficient application process, and quite another to ensure good legal support for asylum seekers. Here we continue to have serious concerns, and many asylum seekers, whose cases are refused when friends with almost identical cases are accepted, see the asylum system as a lottery.

Swamping

Home Secretary David Blunkett's remarks about asylum-seeker children 'swamping' local schools has been a cause of much discussion. Many were outraged at his choice of words, suggesting that Mr. Blunkett knew full well what he was saying and recalling Margaret Thatcher's use of the word 'swamp' just before the 1979 election.

We are not trying to stop debate. There needs to be debate on asylum. But we want a debate grounded in information and not one that plays fast and loose with language, or poisons the atmosphere with words like 'bogus' and 'swamping'.

The Refugee Forum was set up by people in Nottingham who welcome asylum seekers, and who know why people seek asylum. Not long ago, in Sighthill in Glasgow, after the racist murder of Firzat Dag, asylum seekers and local people joined together in a march against poverty. Although small, it suggested the real possibility of dialogue and common action between people whose lives have become enmeshed but whose origins are different. This is the movement we should be building.

Rob Peutrell
Chair NNRF

On their bikes!



Araz and Thaer at 118 with renovated bikes donated to NNRF by the Community Service team of the City's Probation Service. Ten bikes have been distributed so far. Recipients pay £5 towards the cost of locks and lights that we are buying from a Health Action Zone grant.

Huda's Mayday speech: 'We are all part of humanity'

"My name is Huda. I am from the Sudan, and I came to the UK in December 2000. I didn't choose to leave the Sudan, I was forced to leave after I was arrested by the Government. I was working for one of the democratic parties. We are against the current Government because there is no democracy in the Sudan.

In my organisation I was responsible for women's rights and women's freedom. I was involved in many activities for women. I worked with women who had been displaced by the civil war or because of natural disaster, and I campaigned against female circumcision. . .

In the Sudan, there are many rules which control women: women are not allowed to work in many kinds of jobs; women are not allowed to travel outside the country except with their husbands, their fathers or their brothers; women are forced to cover their hair; there is no freedom for women as human beings.

I came to the UK because I wanted freedom of speech, I wanted human rights and I wanted respect for me as an individual. We want the British people to care about asylum seekers and refugees, and to support our struggle for our human rights. We are all part of humanity. We shouldn't look at religious or ethnic differences. We are asking the people of the UK to support us." •

Farewell to volunteers

In the spring we lost three of our most dedicated volunteers. Rana Issa was one of the mainstays of the Monday evening drop-in group for refugees.

Originally from Libya, Rana had spent the past two years in Nottingham, perfecting her English and computing skills. In spite of her talents, her contribution to the Nottingham community, and the fact that her brother lives here, Rana was not permitted to make her life here. Instead she has gone to join her sister in Canada. Our loss, their gain.

Hela Schleef spent one semester here on a university programme. During that time, she was a regular volunteer at the centre, mainly helping the children with English and supporting their play activities. She has now returned to her university studies in Germany.

Roy Stansfield developed and maintained the Nottas website and put in hours of work helping NNRF to go online. He has departed for a new life in the US.

We wish all of them well.

Harassment case

In April, Peter Kandola, a senior staff member in the Nottingham office of Capital Accommodation, appeared at Nottingham Magistrates Court charged with harassment of asylum seekers housed by Capital. Harassment is difficult to prove legally as regular instances must be demonstrated. Although the case

was dismissed on day four of the hearing, the District Judge Robert Zara said that some of Peter Kandola's treatment of asylum seekers may have been insensitive, high-handed and oppressive.

Capital Accommodation has a contract with the National Asylum Support Service, part of the Home Office, to house asylum seekers. In Nottingham, it has 600 units of accommodation.

Legal support

Nelsons, one of the largest legal firms in the city, and until recently, one of the main providers of legal advice to asylum seekers, has withdrawn from legally aided asylum work as it is not profitable enough. Since there are only three other legal firms and the Nottingham Law Centre with a franchise to do immigration work, this decision has placed a great strain on the remaining immigration advice resources in the city, and may mean that some asylum seekers are left with inadequate legal advice.

New worker for St. Ann's

The Chase Centre in St. Ann's has appointed a new member of staff to work with asylum seekers and refugees in the area. The half-time post has gone to Nawzad Awchi, who has been a committed volunteer with NNRF. Our congratulations to him and good wishes in the new job. •

MEMBERSHIP FORM

Please tick as appropriate

- I would like to become a member of NNRF.
(Membership is £5 waged and free for those who are unwaged/low waged.)
- Please send me information on how I can help refugees and asylum seekers.
- I would like to make a donation to NNRF and enclose a cheque for £ _____

NAME:

ADDRESS:

POSTCODE:

TELEPHONE:

Cheques should be made payable to: NNRF- Please return this form to: Linda East, Secretary, NNRF, 118 Mansfield Rd, Nottingham NG1 3HL



Contact us

0115 985 9546
refugees@tiscali.co.uk
www.nottas.org.uk

Volunteers needed Can you spare one or two hours a week (afternoon or evening) to help with our clothing store? Help is needed with sorting the clothing and also helping people to find what they need. Contact Sam or Patsy at 0115 985 9546.

Household goods People who have been granted asylum usually start with almost no possessions. Donations of good quality household goods - for example, kitchen equipment, bedding, towels - would be most welcome to help them to set up their homes. If you can help, contact us on 0115 985 9546.

Organisations supporting NNRF include:- Nottingham and District Racial Equality Council; **Refugee Action**; Refugee Housing Association; **Nottingham City Council**; Student Action for Refugees; **Diocese of Southwell Social Responsibility Group**; Notts County Unison; **Nottingham City Unison**; East Midlands Socialist Party; **Lady Bay Baptist Church**; Jewish Socialists' Group; **Notts Socialist Alliance**; Oxfam; **Nottingham Amnesty International**