

Facts from our Annual Review
2002-2003

- Recorded visits to the Centre: c8,400
- Individuals provided with advice and support: 800+
- Number of different activities: 20
- Number of volunteers c.80 (c. 45 active at any time)
- New tenants (refugees granted leave to remain in Britain) helped to set up home: more than 100
- Different nationalities/ ethnic groups: 43
(The largest group of Centre users are Iraqi Kurds, followed by Iranians, Turkish Kurds, Zimbabweans and Afghans).

Responses to our User Survey were unanimously positive about the welcome and support provided. Comments included: *'My problem is always solved.'* *'It helps refugees and makes them feel welcome.'* *'Best in the UK in defending refugees rights.'* *'Long life to the Forum!'*

Ideas for improvement included: *'More interpreters.'* (an on-going problem as our volunteers move into employment). *'Quiet please!'* *'A bigger building.'*

Requests were also made for improved facilities and more activities such as computers, internet access and outings.

It is now extremely difficult for people with Exceptional Leave to Remain to get photo ID. Application for a travel document is very restrictive, proof being required if travel is for work, study, compassionate or religious reasons. One man with ELR was very distressed. He can claim benefits and work, but he could not cash his giro at the post office because he had no photo ID. To get a travel document is virtually impossible; to get a driving licence you need a passport or birth certificate. A catch-22 situation.

New Advice Posts at 118

If their asylum claim is successful, refugees have the right to work and to claim benefits. Most are desperately keen to get a job but they may face many obstacles e.g. lack of information about the UK job market, language difficulties, no references, the need to adapt and learn new skills. The benefit system can be a nightmare of bureaucracy and also penalises those who take casual or temporary jobs. The Forum has long been aware of the special problems faced by refugees in finding appropriate and sustainable employment and we are therefore very pleased to be joining 'Nottingham Works.' This project, which is funded by the Neighbourhood Renewal Fund, aims to help disadvantaged groups across the City find appropriate training and employment.

For two years, an Employment, Training & Education Co-ordinator and a Benefits' Adviser will be based with the Forum and work with refugees across Nottingham, networking with relevant agencies and communities. They will be linked to a Central Employment Team in the City Council and work closely with Job Centre Plus and other similar projects.



The Nottingham and Notts Refugee Forum

Membership Form 2004

Free: unwaged / low waged | £5: waged individual | £10: organisation

I / we would like to join the NNRF

I / we would like to renew my / our membership of the NNRF

I / we would like to make a donation to NNRF

and enclose £.....

Name:

Address:

Email:

Phone:

Date:

Groups: Number of copies of newsletter needed :

Organisation name:.....

Total amount enclosed: £.....

Please make cheques payable to: The Nottingham and Notts Refugee Forum and return this form to

Chris Cann, Membership, NNRF, 118 Mansfield Road, Nottingham, NG1 3HL

The Nottingham & Nottinghamshire
Refugee Forum

Sponsored Fast
Against Asylum Destitution
Jan 9th (8pm) to Jan 11th (8pm).

The event was very successful. 37 people fasted and we had at least 54 helpers/visitors. About half the fasters were asylum seekers or refugees, and the rest were from the host community, including retired people and one person with diabetes.

Other cities – Oxford, Sheffield, Leeds, Cardiff – held similar events.

Section 55 of the Nationality, Immigration and Asylum Act 2002 (which had been in force for one year) denies all support to asylum seekers without dependants who do not make their asylum applications as soon as “reasonably practicable” on arrival in Britain. This ignores the fact that many people arriving do so after facing fear, trauma and violence as well as a harrowing journey, and are usually confused and frightened, as well as maybe having little or no knowledge of English or our asylum system. Some people have been denied support even when they claimed a few hours after arriving (although David Blunkett has recently defined “reasonably practicable” as within three days) or, for others, their arrival time has not been believed. All these people receive no support of any kind – **no home, no food, no shelter**. They are not allowed to work. They must depend on friends, charities or the streets.

In the same situation are people whose asylum applications have been refused, but whose country of origin the government deems “unsafe”. This leaves many people (e.g. from Zimbabwe) in a limbo where they can't return to their countries but have no support

here. These people are made destitute. Similarly, a number of people who do satisfy all the difficult government criteria often have to go without support for a number of weeks or months because of bureaucratic errors. Some are families with children.

The fast was based in St Peter's Centre, belonging to St Peter's Church in the city centre. About 12 people slept there overnight. The rest spent most of the days there. Some with other commitments fasted at home, calling in to St. Peter's Centre to touch base. We kept a diary, in which fasters, supporters and well-wishers wrote. People read, chatted, played board games, did crafts, etc. It was a congenial weekend, in good company.

We held stalls, collected food, got signatures on the petition, and handed out so many leaflets we needed a reprint. Banners hung from the church railings, calling for solidarity with destitute asylum

seekers. We have yet to count all the money, but expect to collect a substantial amount for the Destitution Fund.

We made useful contacts, both in Nottingham and with other cities, where people took up the idea of the fast. Alan Simpson MP came to offer solidarity and helpful advice. We were in the Nottingham Evening Post three times, an interview was broadcast on local radio, and we were on Central News.

Afterwards, we were provided with free food by local group “Food Not Bombs”, and by a group of Kurdish women who spontaneously decided to cook for us. It was a very sociable end to an intense 48 hours.

However, it was not just about enjoying each other's company and fundraising. We could choose to go without food for 48 hours. For an ever-increasing number, there is no choice. We heard of people



Photo: Jeremy Jago

Continued from previous page

sleeping in bus shelters and dustbins. Too many asylum seekers in Nottingham have to rely on food parcels from a church charity. The issue of destitution among asylum seekers is urgent, and we continue to campaign for the right of everyone to have food, money and shelter; and ultimately the vision is of a world where people don't have to leave their families, friends, homes, jobs and all they know in order to escape from murder, torture or other forms of oppression.

The Refugee Campaign Group (ex-Sponsored Fast Group) currently meets on the first Thursday of the month, 7.30pm, at the International Community Centre. Check with sponsoredfast@hotmail.com. All who want to help are welcome

Some of the people who have been helped by NNRF's Destitution Fund.

Our Destitution Fund helps people in desperate need. We have also used it to give grants to Life at the Centre, where emergency food parcels are distributed. All money in the fund is donated - both our emergency appeal and the Sponsored Fast had good responses. If you would like to donate, please send a cheque payable to "NNRF" to Leo, Treasurer, at NNRF, 118 Mansfield Road, and mark that it is for the Destitution Fund.

S is from Kabul, Afghanistan. He is a follower of the Sikh religion, which he believes is why all his family members were killed and his

community displaced. He, like many others, fled for his life. He is living on the streets of Nottingham. T is a Kosovan man in his 50s who has had his financial support taken away. Now he stays in a corridor in a housing agency at night. The staff allow him to sleep there as he has serious mental health problems.

H, an Iranian, was living in London when his financial support was withdrawn. He came to Nottingham as he had friends here who said they would help him. He had no other means of support and was not allowed to work. He stayed with friends until the landlord said he had to leave. Members of staff from NNRF managed to get him a few nights stay in bed and breakfast accommodation.

S is a young woman from the Congo who had just arrived in Britain. She was in ill health and possibly pregnant. Because of Home Office regulations, she had to register at Liverpool. The NNRF Destitution Fund gave her money for the train. In Liverpool she was given a further appointment to return a week later. Meanwhile, another agency gave her emergency accommodation and money for food, but is not allowed to give her a train ticket. It has since been discovered that she is under 18, and should be in the care of social services, where she now is.

O arrived at the NNRF office just before Christmas. He was very agitated and angry, as his support had been withdrawn. Through an interpreter, he shouted out his case: he had no money, nowhere to live, he was living like a dog. He wanted to be arrested, then at least he would have somewhere to sleep. He had had enough; he wanted to die. He had a letter requesting that he sign at the police station every week and was afraid he would be detained. He was very scared. He was offered a small grant and an emergency food referral.

H is Kurdish. On his wedding day he was attacked with a hammer, and his wife and mother were killed. He was blinded in one eye and is partially blind in the other. He survives any which way he can. Kurdish people in the Nottingham community try to help him, even though mostly they are in no position to do so themselves, as they are on scant benefits.

D is a Palestinian who has also been refused, and has no financial support. He has been sleeping in sheds in allotments.

Food Distribution

If you might be able to help regularly with food distribution at Life at the Centre, please contact Meili on 0115 9625335. More food is always needed - if you can donate some, please contact Meili too.

Household items

Many thanks to Vicky and her colleagues at the University's School of Medicine for their Christmas gifts. Rather than buy Christmas cards for each other, they bought a wonderful selection of kitchen/household goods, which have been distributed to 6 refugees who are being given Floating Support by the Forum. We are offering Floating Support to many refugees who are setting up home for the first time. If you or your family, friends or colleagues would like to donate any household items, please contact Maggie Mairura, Floating Support Manager, on 0115 941 5599.

The move to new, larger premises with disabled access has been delayed because of emergency exit issues but these should soon be resolved and hopefully the lease will be signed by the time of printing.....!

Films

In recent years the circulation in politics and the media of a set of negative images and vocabularies relating to refugees and asylum seekers has become part of a new exclusionary process. However, a number of films have been produced which represent a challenge to this view. As yet, the impact of these films has not registered much beyond the art house cinema or the broadsheet newspaper but some have been taken up by UNICEF, Amnesty, Human Rights groups and the EU and have begun to reach wider audiences.

The films listed below deal variously with 'undocumented' migrants, human trafficking, sex slavery and asylum seeking, and, in very different ways, can be seen as resources for an understanding of the new 'global economy' brought about since 1990 by the combination of economic and cultural global capitalism and the mass migration of peoples across the world. The films all try to offer some kind of agency and voice for the complex and multiple events of political and economic migration, and, in so doing, challenge the representations imposed upon the world and its different peoples by political and economic elites, concerned only with furthering their own geopolitical interests. In other words, stories are beginning to be told which confront the dominant images and symbols which sustain global capitalism ideologically.

It is not being claimed, of course, that the films are revolutionary, or radical even in some cases, or that they will bring about a massive change in popular perceptions of refugees and asylum seekers, but by providing some space for the circulation of other values and possibilities, they at least keep the chance of dialogue open.

FEATURE FILMS:

Beautiful People (director: Dizdar; UK) VHS
 The Boy who Stopped Talking (Sombogaart; Holland) VHS
 Bread and Roses (Loach; UK) DVD
 *Code Unknown [Code Inconnu; France] (Haneke) DVD
 Dirty Pretty Things (Frears; UK) DVD
 Distant Lights (Schmid; Germany) no UK distribution as yet
 *In This World (Winterbottom;UK) DVD
 Journey of Hope (Koller; Switzerland) VHS
 *Lamerica (Amelio; Italy) VHS [US only]
 Last Resort (Pawlikowski; UK) DVD
 *Lilya 4-Ever (Moodysson; Sweden) DVD
 Spare Parts (Kozole; Slovenia) no UK distribution as yet
 A Time for Drunken Horses (Ghobadi; Iran) DVD
 Trouble (Austrian film on 'illegal' workers not yet released in cinemas)

* My own choice of the outstanding films

DOCUMENTARIES:

My Migrant Soul (Yasmine Kabir; Bangla Desh) About a Bangla Deshi migrant worker in Malaysia who dies in a detention camp. Not available as yet
 Well-founded Fear (Robertson and Camerini; US) A remarkable film about the American political asylum system shot entirely in the New York offices of the Immigration Service. Available on-line: info@wellfoundedfear.org
 When Mother Comes Home for Christmas (Nilita Vachani; India) About a migrant worker from Sri Lanka, living as a child-minder in Europe, and returning home to her children for the first time in eight years. Limited availability

It is hoped that some of the above films will feature in a mini-festival later this year organised by the NNRF and the Institute for Cultural Analysis (at Nottingham Trent) in conjunction with the Broadway Cinema.

Roger Bromley

THE NEW BILL

Some of the provisions of the Asylum and Immigration (Treatment of Claimants, etc) Bill:

Clause 2 - creates a new offence of entering the UK without a passport, carrying a sentence of up to 2 years imprisonment
 Clause 11 - empowers the Home Secretary to designate parts of a country, and particular types of person (by reference to such factors as their race or gender), as safe and, therefore disintitled to full consideration of their asylum claim in the UK
 Clause 15 - empowers immigration officers to electronically tag any or all asylum seekers
 Clause 7 - extends powers to withdraw support for asylum seekers, and it is in conjunction with this that the Home Secretary issued his threat to take away asylum seekers' children
 Clause 16 - increases the powers of the Office of the Immigration Services Commissioner (OISC) to regulate immigration advice and tackle poor and unscrupulous representatives
 Clause 10 excludes the judiciary from oversight of government decisions to refuse asylum and remove asylum seekers from the UK. It is the most worrying provision in the Bill. Refugees fleeing from terror and torture frequently have needed to turn to the courts for protection against poor and incompetent decisions of the Home Office or Immigration Appellate Authority (IAA). Moreover, judicial scrutiny is critical to ensuring that governments and public bodies act within their powers and with respect to individual's human rights.
 Make your voice heard in opposing this Bill
 *Write to your MP *Write to your local or national newspaper *Raise the issue at your trade union *Tell your friends, family and colleagues

New Website!

Check out NNRF's new website at www.nottsrefugeeforum.org.uk/index.htm