

Myth-busting facts and figures about refugees and asylum seekers

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• MYTH: “‘Bogus’ asylum seekers abusing the system.”

Many asylum seekers who are initially refused refugee status go on to win their appeals, reflecting the poor quality of initial decision making at the Home Office. Amnesty International’s February 2004 report revealed Home Office asylum decisions are based on ‘inaccurate and out-of-date country information’, ‘unreasoned decisions about people’s credibility’ and ‘a failure to properly consider complex torture cases’.

Government figures show that the Home Office got the initial decision wrong in nearly 10,845 asylum cases in the last reported calendar year (2004), meaning around 1 in 5 cases are overturned after costly appeals. This figure rises to nearly 4 in 10 cases from Somalia, Eritrea and Sudan, 1 in 3 for Ethiopian cases and 1 in 4 for asylum applications from the former Yugoslavia.

In 2004 nearly 4,615 Iraqis were refused refugee status or ‘exceptional leave to remain’ out of 4,815 applicants. 93% of cases were again rejected on appeal.

For many, a false document is the only means of escape. Such documents make them appear to be making an unfounded application, however, governments often refuse to issue passports to known political dissidents, or imprison them when they apply. In such cases refugees have no choice but to resort to illegal means, such as using false travel documents, in order to escape. Nonetheless, the Asylum and Immigration Act 2004 criminalises those who without documentation and punishes them with up to 2 years imprisonment.

In addition, Britain has had restrictive measures in place for some time in order to deter refugees



from coming here. The Immigration and Asylum Act 1999 extends ‘carrier’s liability’ legislation to cover all road vehicles, air transport, shipping and international railway services whereby carriers are fined £2000 for each passenger brought to Britain without valid travel documentation.

• MYTH: “Most asylum seekers actually come from safe countries.”

Civil unrest, war or instability has been documented in the main countries from which those claiming asylum have fled. Most refugees in recent years have come from Iran, Somalia, Zimbabwe, Pakistan, Iraq and the Congo – countries in conflict or with a history of grave human rights abuses.

• MYTH: “Many asylum seekers are ‘illegal’.”

By definition there is no such thing as an ‘illegal asylum seeker’. Britain signed the 1951 Convention on Refugees, which codifies in law that anyone has the right to apply for asylum in Britain and remain until a final decision on their application has been made.

The Press Complaints Commission has issued guidance to journalists following complaints stating that the term ‘illegal asylum seeker’ breaches its code of practice as it leads to ‘misleading or distorted terminology.’ (Guardian 23 October 2003)

The fact that an asylum seeker may have entered the country illegally does not mean his or her case lacks credibility. It is virtually impossible for people fleeing persecution to reach Britain without resorting to the use of false documents.

• MYTH: “Britain is a soft touch for asylum seekers.”

The idea that Britain or any other European country is a ‘soft touch’ is simply not true.

On the contrary, as European countries introduce increasingly tough immigration controls, it has become extremely difficult to gain entry to Europe in the first place. The sealing of the Channel Tunnel and the closure of Sangatte have decreased numbers entering this country.

In 2004, out of the 55,390 total initial decisions, 2,160 people (4%) were granted asylum (before appeal), 4,195 (8%) were granted discretionary leave to remain or humanitarian protection and 49,040 (89%) were refused asylum.

Welfare provision for asylum seekers in Britain is far from generous. They receive payment which is one third less than basic income support. This amounts to less than £39.34 per week – 30% below the poverty line. They are not allowed to work, even though they are very keen to seek employment. Washing machines, TVs or videos are not provided, contrary to the lies peddled in sections of the tabloid media.

Asylum seekers are housed in “hard-to-let” properties that no one wants in the least popular estates in areas with multiple social problems, or are farmed out to privately rented flats which are often in sub-standard condition.

Many asylum seekers prefer to come to Britain because of family ties, the existence of established communities of their own nationality or ethnic origin or because they have a knowledge of English. These are all legitimate reasons for wanting to claim asylum in this country.

A joint study by Oxfam and the Refugee Council shows that the asylum system in Britain, far from being a ‘soft touch’, institutionalises poverty. The report looked at 40 organisations that work with asylum seekers and refugees, and revealed that of those with whom they have contact, 85% of this group experience hunger, 95% cannot afford to buy clothes or shoes and 80% are not able to maintain good health. Asylum seekers are one of the most vulnerable groups of people to such abuse. The cockle pickers who died in Morecambe Bay included asylum

seekers, who were targeted by illegal gangmasters, because they were unable to find legal, safe work.

On their arrival, asylum seekers have to fill in a 19-page legal document in English (the Statement of Evidence Form) and send it to the Home Office in time (often within 10 days), together with supporting documents. A large number of refugees’ applications (4,510 in 2004) are rejected on the grounds of ‘non compliance’, i.e. failing to comply with this rule. New restrictions on legal aid will mean that asylum seekers will not have adequate support to help them apply successfully. This has serious ramifications on creating ‘failed applicants’.

• MYTH: “Britain is in danger of being ‘swamped’ by huge numbers of refugees and asylum seekers.”

Britain hosts less than 3.2% of the world’s refugees and asylum seekers. There are about 9 million refugees around the world, the majority of whom are living in less developed countries. The developing countries provide asylum to 74.3% of the global refugee population, leaving the wealthier countries to help just 25.7%.

Asylum applicants fell from 61,050 in 2003 to 33,960 in 2004, representing less than 0.1% of the population. (Source: Home Office asylum figures 2004. NB: Britain’s population is 58 million.)

Britain ranks only 18th among 50 industrialised countries in the world when comparing the numbers of asylum seekers to the population of the host country. Austria has 18.2 asylum applications in every 1000

The UN is right in that richer countries like the UK are simply not pulling their weight when it comes to looking after people who are forced to flee their homelands. The vast majority of refugees find help in developing countries, not the west, so we should be doing a lot more.’

Maeve Sherlock, Chief Executive, Refugee Council (Guardian 19 April 2006)

Refugee numbers per region at 1 January 2005

Asia	3,471,000	37.5% of world’s refugees
Africa	3,023,000	32.7%
Europe	2,068,000	22.4%
North America	562,000	6.08%
Oceania	76,000	0.82%
Latin America & the Caribbean	36,000	0.4%
Total	9,236,000	

(Source: The State of the World’s Refugees, Human Displacement in the New Millennium, The Office of the UNHCR, 2006)

people whilst Britain has 5.5 in every 1000. Britain with its average GDP per capita of £15,450, hosts about 4.8 refugees per 1,000 inhabitants while Kenya hosts over 7 refugees per 1,000 inhabitants and has an average GDP per capita of £600. (Source: UNHCR website, Asylum Levels and Trends in Industrialised Countries 2005).

• MYTH: “Refugees are a threat to the British way of life and to our national identity.”

Refugees and immigrants enrich British economy, science, society and culture.

- 17 Nobel Laureates, 71 Fellows or Foreign Members of the Royal Society and 50 Fellows or corresponding Fellows of the British Academy are refugees.
- Fish and chips was brought to Britain by 17th century Jews expelled from Portugal.
- 30,000 jobs created in Leicester by Ugandan Asian refugees who settled in the city in the 1970s
- Peter Paduh, a refugee from the Balkans who set up the computer recycling firm Maxitech is the winner of the 2005 Young Business Person in London award
- Some of the most famous names in British art – Joseph Conrad (writer), Anish Kapoor (artist), Mona Hatoum (artist), Alec Issigonis (designer of the Mini)
- Some of the most famous names in media and entertainment – Rachel Weisz (actor), Omid Djalili

“The danger in the current international context is that states will use the issue of terrorism to legitimise the introduction of restrictive asylum practices and refugee policies, a process which began well before the events of September 11 2001. This has led to a tendency to criminalise migrants, including asylum seekers, by associating them with people smugglers and traffickers... the rise of xenophobia and fear of asylum seekers in many countries... has led to a tendency to see refugees not as victims but as perpetrators of insecurity.”

(From the State of the World's Refugees, UNHCR, 2006)

(comedian and actor), Ben Elton (comedian and writer), Alan Yentob (BBC Creative director), Yasmin Alibhai-Brown (journalist) – all refugees or children of refugees

- 1,500 refugee teachers across Britain, including some of the most renowned educators – Prof. Wole Soyinka (visiting professor at Cambridge and Sheffield), Sir Karl Popper (teacher of Philosophy at LSE)
- British Medical Association has 1,073 refugee and asylum seeking doctors on its database
- 11 British Nobel prize winners for science were all refugees or children of refugees

(Source: www.refugeeweek.org.uk)

• MYTH: “Asylum seekers are costing the taxpayer a fortune.”

Section 9 of the Immigration and Asylum (Treatment of Claimants etc) Act 2004 allows the Home Office to withdraw support from asylum seeking families with children whose claim has failed and who are considered not to be taking “reasonable steps” to return to their country of origin. As a consequence of these policies, families have been left destitute. It is the chaos created by draconian policies which is inflicting misery on asylum seekers and costing the taxpayer. In 2005, Section 9

was criticised by the Children’s Commissioner for England and Wales, the British Association of Social Workers and many others. The pilot policy is ongoing at the time of writing but the government has included a clause enabling its repeal in the current Immigration, Asylum and Nationality Bill, which is completing its final stages in Parliament.

• MYTH: “Migrant workers are ‘benefit shoppers’.”

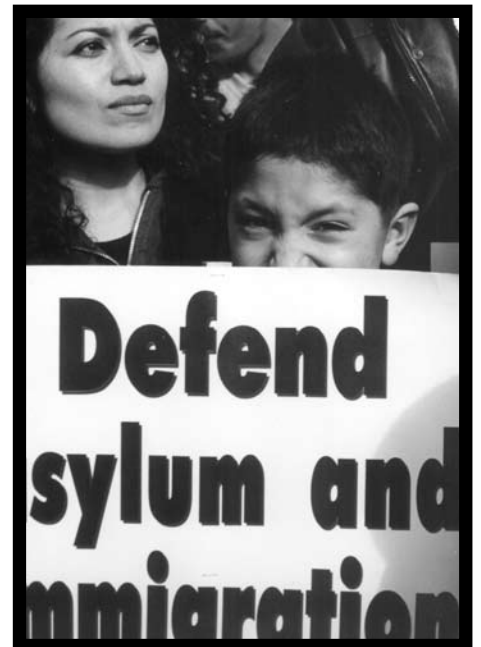
The Home Secretary has praised migrant workers who make a “disproportionate” contribution to the economy, paying £2.5bn more in tax each year than they take out in services.

Total revenue generated by migrants grew in real terms from £33.8 billion in 1999-00 to £41.2 billion in 2003-04. This 22 per cent increase compares favourably to the 6 per cent increase for the UK-born. *(Source: IPPR fact file: Paying their way: the fiscal contribution of immigrants in the UK. April 2005)*

The TUC published research “Propping up rural and small town Britain: Migrant workers from the new Europe” (November 2004) shows that workers from the new Eastern European accession states are working in industries and services such as food processing, hospitality and agriculture that are experiencing major problems filling job vacancies, and which tend to be based away from urban areas. The research also found that these workers are subjected to illegal charges for being found work, of being paid less than British workers, and of non-payment for hours worked and excessive working days and poor, substandard accommodation which is often linked to the job provided.

In June 2006, Immigration Minister Liam Byrne said the government was seeking a report into the possibility of an amnesty for ‘illegal’ migrants, although there are no specific plans for an amnesty at the time of writing. Offering amnesty to London’s illegal workers would rake in an extra £1billion net in taxes to spend on public services. *(Source: IPPR fact file: Irregular Migration in the UK. March 2006).*

Due to the political furore whipped up around new eastern European migrants as these countries became



part of Europe, the government imposed a worker registration scheme within one month of starting work, in order to gain access to benefits and health care. Citizens of the other EU countries do not have to do this.

A report by the European Commission found that Eastern European workers boosted economic growth. The presence of so many workers on relatively low wages has also helped keep mortgage rates low, acting as a deflationary pressure, helping the Bank of England keep interest rates down. *(Guardian 9 February 2006)*

The Home Office’s own research confirms that refugees’ talents are under-used in Britain. Some of Britain’s most successful entrepreneurs are refugees.

When countries are ranked on the basis of comparing national wealth to the number of asylum seekers they support, Britain comes 78th in the world and 6th in Europe. That means there are 77 countries, among them some of the poorest in the world, that spend proportionately more of their national wealth on supporting asylum seekers than we do in Britain. These include Kenya and the Congo.

• MYTH: “Asylum seeker children are swamping our schools.”

An OFSTED report found that asylum seeker children are often ‘embraced’ by schools that see them as an asset

rather than a problem. It found that problems were often compounded by inaccurate information from the Home Office, immigration services and other agencies about the families concerned. Teachers believed these children represented opportunities to 'enrich the cultural life of the school'.

• MYTH: "Asylum seekers don't want to work."

Many seekers have left behind businesses or skilled jobs in their home country and are keen to start work and earn. Applicants are not allowed to work in Britain until they are granted refugee status or exceptional leave to remain. This is a complete waste of their human resources and skills that they are able and willing to put to use in this country.

• MYTH: "Once asylum seekers enter Britain they never want to go back to their country of origin."

Refugees go back to their country once the reasons that forced them to flee no longer exist. For example, most South Africans and Chileans who fled to Britain returned when it was safe for them to do so.

• MYTH: "Refugees increase unemployment and take jobs away from 'real' British citizens."

Britain's working population is declining, while its population's aspirations to do only clean, sedentary, well paid jobs are rising. Often it is foreigners who perform the arduous and low-paid jobs in cleaning or catering, who work as

care assistants, do casual work on their farms, drive mini-cabs, or deliver pizzas.

In addition, Britain's low birth-rate of 1.77 means that this country will need to import migrants simply to keep its working-age population stable between now and 2050 and to ensure the increasing number of pensions can be financed for our ageing population. National Statistics figures for 2004 show that 582,000 people migrated to Britain while over half that number, 360,000 Britons emigrated.

• MYTH: "Asylum seekers are linked to criminal gangs."

Statistics show there has been no refugee crime wave and that there is no established connection between asylum and increased crime rates. In fact, asylum seekers are less likely to commit major crimes than British citizens because doing so would affect their asylum application. According to a report published by the Association of Chief Police Officers, refugees are more likely to become victims of crime. There has been a marked increase in racist attacks as a result of the hostile publicity around asylum seekers. When they are victims of physical or verbal abuse it is rarely reported in the press.

The media furore about the foreign national prisoners in the run up to the 2006 local elections played a role in the advances made by the

British National Party, which more than doubled their council seats to 48. (For an interesting article by Juliet Lyon from the Prison Reform Trust on this subject, visit <http://www.guardian.co.uk/comment/story/0,,1761983,00.html>)

• MYTH: "Refugees are able to apply for asylum in Britain from abroad."

Refugees are people who have been forced to flee their homes due to human rights abuses. It is impossible for them to apply for asylum while they remain in their home countries for fear of reprisals, leaving them no choice as to where they can make their claim. Many asylum seekers who overcome the odds to reach this country have suffered extensive physical and mental trauma in their own countries. They are prepared to give their life savings to agents and to suffer dreadful and often dangerous conditions on the journey in order to escape persecution or death in their own countries. Why would they not deserve Britain's assistance?

For more information, contacts for other useful organisations, to invite a speaker on this issue to your branch, and to download the full pack, please visit www.naar.org.uk, email info@naar.org.uk, or ring 020 7247 9907.

Make an anti-racist pledge today:

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The National Assembly Against Racism campaigns against racism in all its manifestations. With national black organisations playing a leading role – in alliance with the Jewish and Muslim communities, the trade unions, the student movement, religious groups and many others, NAAR has set about building a mass anti-racist movement uniting all those who believe racism must be fought and not appeased.

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