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Press Complaints Commission

20th May 2004

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House of Commons
London
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Director

Tim Toulmin

Dear Dr Harris

Thank you for your letter of 7th May, to Tim Toulmin, which has been passed to me for a response. I apologise for the delay, but we have had to have the relevant files recalled.

In regard to those complaints Tim previously sent you, I now enclose copies of the original articles and – where possible – details of the published action taken to resolve the complaint. All of the complaints provided by Tim were resolved to the satisfaction of the complainant.

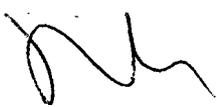
As I am sure you will understand, we cannot provide copies of our correspondence with the complainant (and vice versa), which are treated as confidential. We are – of course – happy to release details that are otherwise in the public domain.

I enclose, as requested, a copy of our most recent biannual report and – for your information – our Annual Review for 2003.

Do let me know if I can be of further assistance.

With kind regards.

Yours sincerely



Stephen Abell
stephen.abell@pcc.org.uk

Assistant Director

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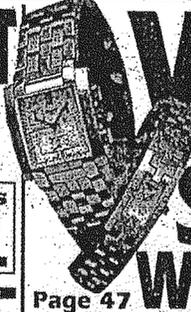
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MANCHESTER UNITED'S SKY SPORTS FIXTURES



8 GREAT PAGES

What's On
MIDWEEK Page 47



WIN A PAIR OF SWISS WATCHES

PLUS: WIN A FANTASTIC TRIP TO NEW YORK - PAGE 12



PICTURE: TREVOR CRAIG

HE'S TOP OF THE POTTERS

▶▶▶ FULL STORY - PAGE 3

TOP HARRY FAN - Jackson Long, 10, from Ryton

YOU PAY FOR REFUGEES' DAY TRIP

TAXPAYERS are picking up the tab after asylum seekers enjoyed a £2,500 day trip to one of the region's most popular tourist attractions. Two hundred of them were ferried by coach to Beamish Museum for the jaunt, sparking fury from North East Tory MEP Martin Callanan. He claimed the day out was a waste of taxpayers' cash and said: "There will be many people who have lost their

EXCLUSIVE
by JAMES MARLEY

jobs who would love to take their families on a day out to Beamish." But Daoud Zaaroura, pictured, of the North of England Refugee Service, said: "Those whose applications for asylum are granted should know about local history and culture." ▶▶▶ FULL STORY - Page 5



Fury over £2,500 jaunt to Beamish



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Tory MEP blasts move to spend taxpayers' cash on asylum seeker outing

By JAMES MARLEY
Chief Reporter

James.marley@ncjmedia.co.uk

HUNDREDS of asylum seekers were treated to a day out at one of the North East's top tourist attractions at the taxpayers' expense.

Labour controlled Newcastle City Council arranged to take 200 asylum seekers on the jaunt to Beamish Museum as part of international refugee week.

The council splashed out £2,500 on the trip from cash provided by the Government to look after asylum seekers in the city.

But the trip was criticised today as a waste of taxpayers' money.

North East Tory MEP Martin Callanan warned splashing out money on days out for asylum seekers could drive people towards far right parties like the BNP.

He said: "Most people in the North East will find this extremely distasteful at a time when many jobs are going in the region."

"There will be many people who have lost their jobs who would love to be able to take their families on a day out to Beamish."

"When people believe that main stream political parties are indulging in this sort of ridiculous gesture it does drive people in the direction of extremist parties."

"The North East wants to be welcoming and hospitable but I draw the line at free days out and luxury excursions."

One visitor to the museum said: "It doesn't seem right that our taxes are being used to pay for asylum seekers to have a day trip out."

"It is a real treat for me to be able to take my family out to somewhere like Beamish. Something I have to save up for. I don't see the council offering it to my family for free."

"It must really grate on people who can't afford a day out like this."

The council hired four coaches to ferry the asylum seekers to the Co Durham her-

Refugees enjoy £2,500 day trip



BACK IN TIME - the main street at Beamish where people dress in costume would have been one of the attractions



PROTEST Martin Callanan



INTEGRATE Daoud Zaaroura

itage attraction and paid for entry to the museum, which costs £9 for an adult and £5 for a child when making a group booking.

One of the coach drivers, who ferried in the refugees, said: "We were amazed the council was using taxpayers' cash for a treat like this. Surely there must be more important things to spend the money on?"

But a council spokeswoman defended the trip saying: "International Refugee week is an annual celebration to mark our nation's honourable tradition of providing sanctuary to those who have suffered

persecution in their own countries."

"It's an opportunity to celebrate the rich and diverse mix of cultures in our region. It was decided this year that it was important to help people seeking asylum and refugees to appreciate the North East's cultural diversity."

"A group of 200 asylum seekers spent a day at Beamish Museum, which is a nationally appreciated showcase for our heritage."

"It was a very successful outing, particularly enjoyed by the children. Part of our remit is to work hard to integrate these people into local com-

munities. Events like this build on our day to day work to foster an appreciation of local history. The outing cost £2,500 and was funded as part of our existing contract with the Government."

And Daoud Zaaroura, chairman of the Newcastle-based North of England Refugee Service, said he welcomed anything that helped to integrate asylum seekers into the local culture and community.

He said: "It is an initial investment encouraging refugees to make a greater contribution to local life."

"It is important for those

whose applications for asylum are granted that they know about the local history and culture."

There are more than 6,220 asylum seekers in the region being helped by the National Asylum Seeker Support Service, compared with 4,765 for the same period last year. The main concentrations of asylum seekers are in the urban conurbations of Tyneside and Wearside. Newcastle has 1,775 and Sunderland 1,030. The majority of new asylum seekers are from Iraq, Zimbabwe and Somalia.

►►► COMMENT - Page 6

Should asylum seekers be taken on days out at a council's expense?

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Past Decisions



Complainant name: Refugee Council

Report: 61

Paper: Evening Standard

Clauses noted: 1

Complaint:

Ms Jean Candler, the Press Officer for the Refugee Council (www.refugeecouncil.org.uk), complained that an article inaccurately referred to a refugee family as 'illegal asylum seekers'. There is no such thing in law as an 'illegal' asylum seeker.

Resolution:

The complaint was resolved when the newspaper – although accidentally republishing the original headline of the article under complaint– published a letter from the Refugee Council.



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Please give a daytime phone number. Letters withholding name and address will not be published

Letters email: letters@standard.co.uk

This charging chaos will drive us all mad

KEN Livingstone's ideological hatred of the car is going to lead Londoners to disaster. If motorists are to be deterred from driving into London, how does Ken intend to accommodate the displaced car users?

There has been no introduction of park-and-ride at boundary points. The public-transport system is already a crushing nightmare during the rush hour, yet it hasn't been upgraded to accommodate extra passengers — in fact it's at an all-time low with the Central line out of operation altogether.

The system for buying zone passes is a confusing mess, with many people still waiting for their swipe cards. There are no discounts for season tickets and if you have bought in advance and then can't use your pass it's tough luck, because there are no refunds.

Low-paid workers who rely on their cars will be forced to find jobs outside London. Many lone women will be forced onto often dangerous public

transport late at night. The sheer nuisance value of getting into London will mean many people will not even bother to make the effort, causing disaster for London businesses.

Today's introduction of the congestion charge is, of course, the thin edge of the wedge. It will inevitably be increased every six months and the easy source of revenue will lead to other British cities jumping on the bandwagon so that more motorists will be paying a mobility tax just to travel from A to B.

Tony Clayman, Wilton Road, SW1.

I TRAVEL by bus every day and for several months have seen posters from TfL asking what the congestion charge is for and giving the answer: more buses. Then I read your article "Livingstone demands an extra £50 council tax to fund police and buses" (12 February). So can someone assuage my confusion?

Patricia Raj, Golborne Road, W10.

THERE IS one obvious answer to the current chaos over payment of the congestion charge. It is that drivers should be able to buy a number of charge credits in advance, which they then top up as necessary.

This works perfectly on the toll bridges in New York, and I cannot see why it should not be used in London, instead of the ridiculous demand that you specify each and every day you intend to travel.

I suspect the reason why this system is unavailable is that it would make it too easy to use — it would seem that the organisers want it to be as difficult as possible, as a further deterrent to using the car.

Incidentally, I wrote to Congestion Charging London weeks ago proposing that it adopt this method, but never even had a reply.

Peter Gillman, Warminster Road, SE25.

THE congestion charging system is already congested! Last week the website refused my three attempts to register — plus two enquiries — with the announcement: "We are overloaded — try again later" (no "sorry", "please" or "thank you", mind). So how am I supposed to register, or get my queries answered?

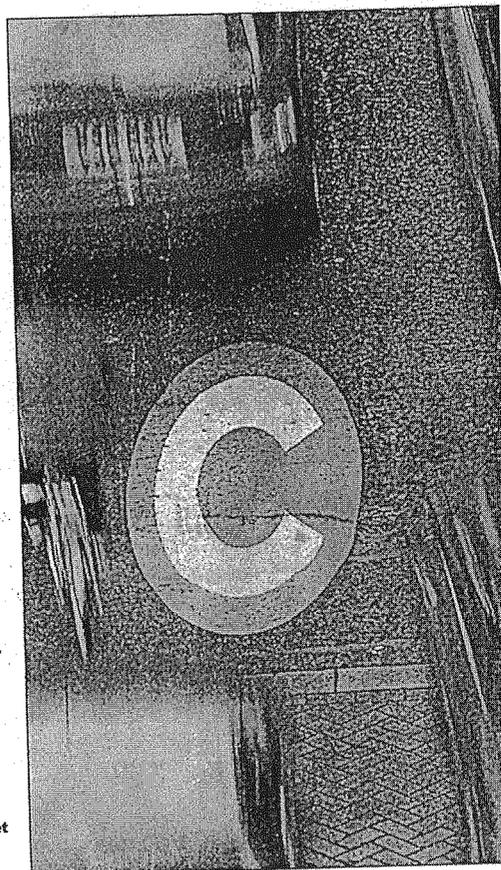
J R Raymond, art.scape@virgin.net

GREENS support the introduction of congestion charging as the first step towards rethinking our transport needs — indeed, I actually have concerns that the scheme might not be tough enough to stop the majority of rush-hour drivers.

About half the traffic using my local roads in south-east London are on their way to somewhere more important — contributing dirt, noise, disruption and casualties, but no local gain.

I believe that the polluter should pay, and given the costs in terms of air pollution in premature deaths from respiratory conditions, childhood asthma, noise and road deaths, the £5 charge really doesn't cover it.

Those who attack congestion charging as a regressive tax should know that the poorest children are three times more likely to be killed on the roads than the richest. The most crucial thing the



C for confusion: today is the start of more charges for motorists

scheme can achieve is to make us question our car-dependent, over-stretched lives. The reason for problems with our fragile and overloaded transport system is not just two decades of under-investment — it is because we are travelling further and more often, in a frantic attempt to make our lives work better.

Congestion charging is part of a package of measures. Like everyone else, I have my criticisms and fears — but I want to give the scheme a chance to work. And if it is successful, then I want all of us to be given the choice of opting in.

Jenny Jones, Green Member of the London Assembly, The Queen's Walk, SE1.

In brief

● WHO cares if G Paltrow and Chris are still an item? Coldplay Chris says "we're hotter than 14 February"! In Chris not wanting publicise Coldplay through this rela Perhaps he also my frustration t media is more i in his private lif his talented bar Jasc Spensley'

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When illegal is legal

IN your article (Council tenants sell on flat for £34,000 profit in two months, 24 September), a refugee family were described as "illegal asylum seekers" who later gained "legal asylum". The inaccurate use in the press of expressions of this kind only serves to exacerbate the immense confusion that exists among the wider public in regard to the terms "asylum seekers" and "refugees".

All asylum seekers are given legal admission to the UK while their claims are assessed. To guarantee that no one is returned to face torture or persecution, the United Nations Refugee Convention ensures that all asylum claims are considered and no one is penalised for entering a country clandestinely.

There is, therefore, no such thing as an "illegal asylum seeker".

Once offered protection as refugees in this country, as was the case with the family referred to in your report, refugees enjoy the same rights as other British citizens. They can work here and have permanent residency.

The Refugee Council fully expects these important issues to be reported — and debated — in the media.

We want to continue to work with the media to ensure that the public have access to a fair and unprejudiced portrayal of asylum seekers and refugees and the issues that surround them.

Fazil Kawani, director of communications, Refugee Council, Bondway, SW8.

MARF

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the refugee council

Source: Evening Standard (London)
 Date: Tuesday 24. September 2002
 Page: 15
 Circulation: .
 Ad Rates: ABC 432026 Daily
 page rate £11,715.00
 scc rate £55.00
 Tel: 020 7938 6000

Durrants

ASYLUM

(B9110-1)

Page 1 of 2

Housing

Council tenants sell on flat for £94,000 profit in two months

'The priority must be to stem the loss of valuable housing, particularly in London'

By Ross Lydall, Local Government Correspondent

IT is the council home that became a goldmine.

Only weeks after buying it from their local council, its tenants sold it on — and walked away with a £94,000 profit.

The couple, Arberore and Petrit Riza, were able to purchase the flat in Bloomsbury at a knock-down rate under the right to buy scheme.

Eight weeks later, they had earned a 57 per cent return on their £165,000 investment. Though they had done nothing illegal, it has been described as one of the worst abuses of the system.

It comes as pressure grows on the Government to overhaul right to buy, which has seen 236,521 homes sold off in London since the scheme was introduced in 1980.

Nationwide, nearly 1.5 million homes have been lost — half of which have not been replaced as social housing. At the same time, the number of homeless families has rocketed from under 5,000 to 81,250, three quarters of whom live in London.

With an average house in Greater London now costing 8.6 times a nurse's salary, 6.7 times a teacher's salary and more than five times that of a police officer, unions see affordable homes as an essential part of a package to recruit and retain staff. Deputy Prime Minister John Prescott announced plans in June to build 90,000 new homes in the South-East for key workers.

According to the homeless charity Shelter, nearly £4.5 billion has been given to tenants as discounts on the purchase of their council homes — more than the Government has spent subsidising the building of new housing association properties.

Ben Jackson, Shelter's director of external affairs, said: "The right to buy as it stands is a catastrophic waste of taxpayers' money. It is exacerbating a chronic shortage of affordable homes.

"The priority must be to stem the

loss of valuable housing, particularly in London and the South-East where shortages are most severe and thousands of families are experiencing the misery of homelessness."

Camden council, which sold the flat in Tonbridge Street to the Rizas, carried out a survey into its right-to-buy sales. It found that, of the 71 properties it sold over three separate periods, nearly half had been resold or sub-let.

It also found examples of tenants buying their properties at a discount and then reselling them for massive profits soon afterwards.

These include: a property in Drury Lane, Covent Garden, that was bought for £60,000 and sold for £400,000; a home in Retcar Place, Highgate, that was bought for £21,000 and resold for £155,500; and a house in Parliament Hill, Hampstead, that was bought for £230,000 and resold for £525,000.

Camden says it has lost 8,700 homes — one quarter of its housing stock — because of right to buy. It estimates that, by 2015, half of its council homes will have been bought by tenants.

Last year it sold 761 properties, while providing only 182 new homes in partnership with housing associations.

The Rizas were given their council home after fleeing Serbian persecution in Kosovo. They arrived as Arberore Riza qualified for the scheme after two years as a secure tenant

illegal asylum seekers in 1995 and were offered the property two years later after gaining legal asylum. They qualified for the right to buy scheme in 1999 after two years as secure tenants, selling it in February last year for £297,000.

However, because they sold it less than two months later rather than retaining it for at least two years, the Rizas, who have two children, had to hand back their £38,000 discount — but still made a profit of £94,000.

Piers Wauchope, leader of the Conservative opposition at Camden, said: "Although the right to buy

has been a great benefit to many people, it's abuses like this that are likely to ruin it for everybody."

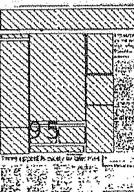
Mr Riza, a travel agent, had been questioned by Serb police about his relationship with UN staff, while Mrs Riza, an architecture student, could no longer attend university because it was closed to Albanians. "We felt that we were in danger," she told the Guardian in June.

On arrival, they went to the Home Office and were eventually granted the right to stay. "They didn't threaten to deport us because we had a child, but we were scared."

Mrs Riza, 32, now a student at Middlesex University, has worked with other Kosovans to help them settle in the UK.

A council spokeswoman said: "Our feelings are exactly the same, whether it's asylum seekers or English nationals who have lived there all their lives," she said. "There does seem to be an injustice in the right to buy system."

Mrs Riza refused to discuss the flat when contacted by the Evening Standard.





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Past Decisions



Complainant name: Dr Temple complained, on behalf of the Tavistock and Portman NHS Trust

Report: 65

Paper: Sunday Express

Clauses noted: 1

Complaint:

Dr Temple complained, on behalf of the Tavistock and Portman NHS Trust, that an article about the London's NHS Tavistock Clinic's policies towards treating asylum seekers contained inaccuracies.

Resolution:

The complaint was resolved when the newspaper agreed to publish a letter from the complainant on the matter.



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Counselling for Asylum Seekers

Your article "Asylum Seeker? Doctor will see you first" (August 31 2003) suggested that The Tavistock and Portman NHS Trust gives priority to asylum seeker patients with mental health problems, while UK citizens are made to wait.

We do not deliberately prioritise asylum seekers and place UK citizens on waiting lists. All patients receive the same standard of care. Pressures are caused by an increasing demand for outpatient mental health interventions from the population generally, not from specific social or ethnic groups.

We welcome the Government's prioritising of mental health services. The task for the NHS is to meet the challenge of providing high quality, accessible outpatient services for all persons in distress, regardless of race, ethnicity or immigration status.

Dr N O T Temple FRCPsych
Chief Executive
The Tavistock and Portman NHS Trust
London NW3

Asylum seeker? Doctor will see you first



FAST TRACK: Refugees often get to the head of the queue

VICTIMS of tragedy are having to wait up to two years for vital counselling sessions because NHS clinics are being swamped by asylum seekers, who are being fast-tracked for help.

In some areas, refugees make up around 40 per cent of patients seeking aid for their stress and depression.

Charities say mental health services across the country are unable to cope with the demand and insist more Government cash is urgently needed.

Marjorie Wallace, of leading mental health charity SANE, said: "There is tremendous pressure being placed on mental health services because of the growing demand from asylum seekers."

"The Government urgently needs to address ways in which it can ensure that ordinary British people are not being forced to wait longer for help because of this."

But last night it was revealed how relatives of murder victims have struggled for years to get post-traumatic stress counselling.

Frances Hogg, whose daughter Andrea Dykes was killed in the 1999 Soho pub bombing, had to wait two years before she was given NHS counselling.

And Clive Elliott, operations director of The Victims of Crime Trust, said: "We have written to Tony Blair telling him about our concerns."

"Some of our members have lost their loved ones in the most appalling way and desperately need counselling to deal with the tremendous pressures on a family in these types of tragedies, but they experience enormous difficulty in getting any counselling." Sophie Corlett, of MIND, Britain's biggest mental health

By Alison Gordon

charity, said: "We have come across people who have had to wait at least 18 months for counselling. In the meantime, hard-pressed doctors are often using anti-depressants as a quick-fix solution."

Yet asylum seekers can obtain help immediately from once-weekly sessions for post-traumatic stress counselling at the Refugee Council's London HQ.

They can also get automatic referrals for counselling at trauma units at London's NHS Maudsley Hospital and the NHS Tavistock clinic, while UK citizens must queue on waiting lists.

Asylum seekers and refugees will be seen within three weeks at the Tavistock trauma unit where they make up about 40 per cent of referrals. Manager Pat Crawford said: "The unit is being increasingly used by asylum seekers and refugees and there are certainly many more referrals than two years ago."

Adrian Webster, a consultant psychologist who deals with refugee services at the South London and Maudsley Hospital NHS Trust, said: "We are certainly getting many more referrals. It does have a big impact on our services and we have to deal with it within the resources we are already allocated without any additional funding. We work very hard to keep waiting lists down."

The Medical Foundation for the Care of Victims of Torture recently got a £90,000 Government grant to train staff in post-traumatic stress counselling over three years.

A spokesman for the charity, which has helped about 25,000 refugees since it was formed in 1985, said victims were "coping not just with past suffering but with the



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Past Decisions



Complainant name: The Refugee Council

Report: 64

Paper: The Mail on Sunday

Clauses noted: 1

Complaint:

The Refugee Council complained that an article about the removal of a number of Afghans from the UK was inaccurate in its suggestion of how many Afghans were living in the country illegally and how many were, consequently, to be removed by the government.

Resolution:

The newspaper published a letter from the Refugee Council which corrected the details of the article and commented on the issue of returning refugees to Afghanistan more generally.



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Stop the expulsions

Lack of security in Afghanistan is the biggest obstacle to reconstruction and families continue to face a lack of water, electricity, food and health care. The UK is facilitating highly skilled refugees to go home voluntarily and help in the rebuilding. But at the same time the Home Office is forcing some refugees to return unwillingly and this is undermining the process of reconstruction.

When you reported the first flight of Afghans being forced to return (April 27), you mistakenly suggested that there were 26,000 Afghans here illegally who could be removed. This is not the case – the overwhelming majority have been granted either permanent or temporary safety here.

Even for those whose asylum claims have been rejected, now is not the time to remove them. We urge the Government to suspend enforced returns until the situation stabilises and people can return in safety.

Maeve Sherlock
Refugee Council, London



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 Ad Rates: page rate £50,536.00
 scc rate £224.00
 Tel: 020 7938 6000

ASYLUM

(B9110-1)

Durrants

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Security alert as first of 26,000 illegal Afghans are flown home

THE first of thousands of illegal Afghan immigrants who refused to leave Britain will be forcibly deported tomorrow on a special charter flight.

Heavy security will surround the flight amid fears that passengers could become violent.

As part of the increased security on the eight-hour flight, all guards will wear stab-proof vests.

Before boarding the plane, the bogus asylum seekers will be strip-searched to make sure they are not carrying weapons. Throughout the flight they will remain strapped in their seats and officers have been told to report any suspicious behaviour to the captain immediately.

The Home Office refused to confirm which airport is being used, but immigration sources told *The Mail on Sunday* the flight would take off from Stansted, Essex, and that 15 security guards and medical staff would accompany the 40 asylum seekers.

The vast majority of the 26,000 Afghans who have claimed asylum in Britain were refused leave to stay. Many claimed to be escaping

By **Anthony France**

the repressive Taliban regime even though their homeland has been liberated.

They were permitted to stay because the Home Office said Afghanistan was too unsafe for them to return. That decision was recently overturned, but few left voluntarily.

Home Secretary David Blunkett introduced a scheme to pay thousands of Afghans up to £2,500 to leave Britain, but only 39 took up the offer.

The repatriation operation will involve several flights over the next few months and will cost millions of pounds.

An immigration source said: 'This has been planned for a long time. Last week we carried out a series of raids to round up the Afghans living illegally in the UK.'

'They are being held at secure detention centres and tomorrow they will be put on a flight. There will be a large security presence on standby.'

The Government pledged to start returning refugees to Afghanistan

on a large scale over a year ago but this failed to happen. The then Immigration Minister, Lord Rooker, said in January 2002: 'Afghans, month in, month out, are in the top three of people coming here to claim asylum. Nine times out of ten they are young, single men fleeing the Taliban. Well, the Taliban's not there any more.'

In the past decade, 26,000 Afghans have claimed asylum, but only one in ten has won the legal right to stay. A further six in ten have been given temporary leave to stay, while the rest have never been removed, despite the failure of their claims.

A Home Office spokeswoman said: 'We always said this would be happening in April. Until now we haven't been able to send people back to Afghanistan because of the situation there.'

'I cannot tell you which airport will be used because we do not want people taking photographs of them, which could lead to their identification at home.'

'There will be security on board and before the flight, a risk assessment will be carried out on each asylum seeker.'





the refugee council

Source: Mail on Sunday
Date: Sunday 27. April 2003
Page: 54,55

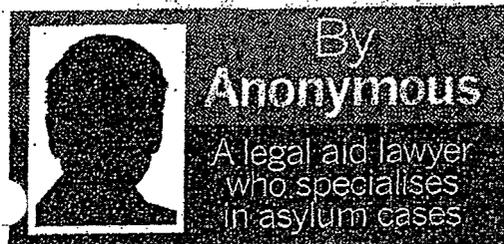
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A solicitor in a leading law firm exposes the greedy cynicism of bogus refugees – and the lawyers who represent them



By
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A legal aid lawyer
who specialises
in asylum cases

This story is so breathtaking that it sounds like an urban myth – but it isn't. An asylum seeker was appearing before a court recently to argue his case for being allowed to stay in this country. He had spent many hours with his solicitor describing the terrible persecution he had suffered in his home country under the fundamentalist Islamic regime. As a committed Christian, he felt he had no choice but to flee for his life and seek sanctuary in Britain.

His case had taken months to get to the appeal stage, and now he was being cross-examined, through an interpreter, by the Home Office official. As a practising Christian, he was asked, could he please write down the names of any of the disciples he could recall?

After a couple of minutes, he handed back his list. Translated, it read: Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday...

Yet, despite this absurd scene – and having failed to persuade the court of even a basic knowledge of the fundamentals of Christianity – he still wouldn't give up. The next morning he turned up at his solicitor's office, arrogantly insisting it was all the interpreter's fault.

For those of us who work with asylum seekers every day, it isn't even that surprising a story. In fact, I have heard of almost exactly the same thing happening to a number of other solicitors. At the high street law firm I work for, we come across equally dubious cases every week.

But what most people aren't aware of is the obscene amount of taxpayers' money that is squandered in legal fees on behalf of these undeserving cases. Anyone who earns less than £600 a month is entitled to legal aid, and of course no asylum seekers can admit to earning anything at all because they are forbidden to work.

The first thing we do when they come to us is to sign a 'legal help' form. From then on, every minute preparing their case, attending court or visiting the Home Office immigration office at Croydon can be charged to the Legal Services Com-

mission at around £60 an hour – with additional bills for travelling time, letters and phone calls.

Until the interview stage, when the Home Office first examines a case and takes a decision, I've probably clocked up £500. But it's when the application is refused – as I can almost guarantee it will be – that the big money starts rolling in. For it is then that I start preparing their case for appeal, at least another £1,000 worth of work.

If the client sails through the first application and is granted full refugee status, you should feel a sense of satisfaction in a job well done. But instead, your heart sinks. For you know you are never going to see him – and his legal aid – again.

We in legal aid practices are not so

much concerned with helping people win justice as protecting our share of a financial racket. My medium-size firm is typical in that every one of us, paralegals (unqualified legal workers), trainees and qualified solicitors, is expected to make at least £6,000 a month in fees from these types of cases – £66,000 a year, if you allow for holidays.

That means that a firm with as few as 15 staff working on asylum cases full time can easily take £1 million a year from the taxpayer.

It is quite common for a case-worker to have scores of asylum applications on his files at any one time, though some will be dormant and not become active again until

the lucrative appeal work begins. Other firms work slightly differently and set targets where you have to earn five times your salary. Some of the young, unqualified staff are paid as little as £12,000 a year. But even they would be expected to generate £60,000 in legal aid fees over the year.

It is almost like being a salesman, constantly under pressure to hit your targets. So you avoid asking your client too many questions in case they admit they haven't really been persecuted, and you have to stop acting for them. I haven't

believed the stories of many of my asylum seekers, which makes it difficult to push ahead with their cases, but you are so worried about achieving your

targets that you plod on regardless.

The client will ring you on his mobile phone – contrary to popular belief, many are rich enough to afford the latest models, not to mention enough fancy gold jewellery to shame a rap star – wanting to know what's happening with his case. You feel like saying: 'I don't care about your application, I don't believe a word you've told me.' But, of course, you can't.

One man I heard of turned up claiming he'd been persecuted in his home country in the Middle East because he was gay. But when he arrived at Dover, immigration officers had asked him if he was married or single and he told them his wife had been killed.

When his female solicitor asked him about this apparent discrepancy, his explanation was that he had been frightened to admit he was gay. But then he started coming on to her, asking if she had a boyfriend and saying: 'You are very beautiful, I'd like to get with a girl like you.'

Women solicitors have to put up with extremely disturbing behaviour from male asylum seekers, especially young ones who can be very aggressive and unpleasant. They make sexual comments, apparently intended as flattery, but hugely intimidating. And the solicitor dare not show that she is offended in case the refugee complains she has been rude, and the lucrative case is taken away from her.

With the genuine cases, you see a completely different attitude. They are far less pushy. Their ordeal has made them vulnerable, and they are grateful for help. And they aren't here to get anything out of you – they only want safety, not financial gain. You soon get to tell who is trying it on and who isn't.

What is extraordinary is the way fake asylum seekers behave. They are so well rehearsed in their story, it's as if they are reciting a part in a play.

But if they are asked something that doesn't feature in their script, the story falls to bits. They often try to give huge amounts of detail to confuse you. But the more that they lie, the more holes can be picked in their stories.

Then there are others who arrive not



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even knowing what they are claiming asylum from. The paperwork might say 'political persecution', but that is clearly news to them.

I can usually tell what the client is going to say, just from their country of origin. Nine out of ten from Iran will claim 'religious persecution'.

Women from Africa will almost invariably claim they have been persecuted, either for their own or their husband's political beliefs. They will also insist that their persecutors have raped them.

The first few times I listened to clients telling me the awful things that had been done to them, it was devastating. I ught, 'Oh my God!' as each new ocity was described. I was desperate to help.

But now I find myself sitting there thinking: 'Oh yeah, another gang rape, oh yeah, torture with red hot irons again.' The sad truth is that so many of these stories sound very similar and you begin to suspect everyone must be lying.

And then, of course, there are the clients who simply disappear. You do all the work for them, putting in their application and making sure you are in phone contact all the time. Some of them don't even appear for their interview and their case is heard without them.

Then when their application is refused and you try to get hold of them to tell them and explain the appeal procedure, they've vanished. The phone is dead, letters are not answered and you wonder why they bothered in the first place. They just go and get work illegally, and if they were going to stay illegally anyway, what's the point of going through the proper channels?

Meanwhile, you've worked hard and n up hundreds of pounds in fees - for nothing. It is such a waste of time, money and effort.

Law firms make a lot of money out of the asylum system. It is very dispiriting to work like a dog for £14,000 a year when my company does so well out of the ever-increasing industry, but I'm not after a bigger share of the spoils, nor do I believe that fees charged for legal aid should be cut.

Speeding up the process isn't going to cut costs because as each application is heard, there is a queue of new ones waiting to fill the gap.

I believe the only way to stop all this waste is for asylum seekers to be much more stringently screened on arrival. Don't misunderstand me - if there is the remotest chance they are genuine refugees, they should be allowed to stay. But if the authorities in Dover and Heathrow just turned away the scores who arrive in this country who do not even know what they are claiming asylum from, the problem would be dramatically reduced.

Why do I carry on? For the genuine refugees, whose terrible experiences and great courage move me deeply. If I can use my skills to help them, it makes the job worthwhile. And when

they've won the right to stay, I know I have helped save someone's life and they will never face such danger again. It is a wonderful feeling.

But sadly, that is very rare, and most of my energy, and that of thousands like me, along with millions in taxpayers' money, is being wasted on the endless swarms of economic migrants with no real claim for asylum.

Why is a 'gay victim' chatting up women?

Same old gang rape, same old red hot irons...

Over the top... Asylum seekers scale a fence near the Channel Tunnel entrance in France, en route for Britain and their share of the taxpayers' money

The asylum seekers I meet are so often leering, arrogant liars. But each one is worth £1,500 of taxpayers' cash to us legal aid lawyers