

Briefing: refugees & asylum seekers – the facts

Refugee and asylum issues are extremely prominent in the media and in the political debate. This is an outline of the Scottish Refugee Council's views on some of the topics that are regularly debated and of the reality behind the myths that are all too often presented as facts.



Refugees and asylum seekers are not to be confused with economic migrants or illegal immigrants

- Asylum seekers are legal residents of the UK. International law (and in particular the United Nations Refugee Convention) gives the victims of persecution the right to apply for asylum. We have a moral and also a legal obligation to assist asylum seekers. Once someone has received a positive decision on their case they are officially recognised as a refugee and international law states that there is no reason why they should be treated less favourably than any other UK citizen.
- The huge variations in the numbers of refugees produced by countries that have similar levels of economic development but different human rights records show that refugees are not economic migrants. Many refugees from the Democratic Republic of Congo are now living in Scotland after fleeing a civil war which has caused the deaths of millions of people. Tanzania, one of the poorest countries in the world but which is on the whole politically stable, does not produce large numbers of refugees. Algeria, where Islamic fundamentalists are fighting government troops in a bloody civil war that has cost thousands of civilian lives, produces more refugees than Egypt. Saddam Hussein's Iraq where opponents of the regime were routinely tortured and killed produced more refugees than neighbouring Jordan.
- Asylum seekers and refugees leave behind careers, houses, friends and family when they come to the UK. A single asylum seeker has to survive on £37.77 a week in benefits – just over £5 a day. Hardly the sort of sum that will entice people to risk their lives in order to reach Britain.

Refugees come here because they have no alternative

- The countries that produce the highest numbers of refugees are countries where human rights abuses are widespread and where the political situation is unstable. In 2002, the 5 countries producing the largest numbers of asylum seekers coming to the UK were Iraq, Zimbabwe, Afghanistan, Somalia and China.
- There is a clear link between human rights abuses occurring around the world and refugees arriving in the UK. For example, in the 1990s many people left Bosnia and Kosovo when acts of genocide were being carried out in the former Yugoslavia. The number of applications from Zimbabwe has risen dramatically recently as repression in the country has intensified.

How many people claim asylum in the UK?

- 110,700 people applied for asylum in the UK in 2002.
- We estimate that approximately 10,000 asylum seekers and refugees are now living in Scotland - mainly in Glasgow.
- The UK has not taken in more refugees than other European countries. We are currently ranked 7th in Europe in terms of numbers of refugees per inhabitant (according to government figures from 2003). People come to the UK for various reasons: because like many people around the world they speak English or because they can rely on the support of well-established refugee communities. Britain's colonial past also created cultural links that remain strong to this day.
- Countries with fewer resources are taking in many more people. Pakistan was host to two million refugees from Afghanistan in the wake of the September 11 attacks that led to the military intervention against the Taliban. The UK is the world's 4th largest economy. Are we seriously saying we cannot offer a refuge to people fleeing some of the most brutal regimes in the world?
- It is inappropriate for the debate to focus solely on figures and the reduction of numbers. People either need protection or they do not. If you set a limit of, for example 50,000 people a year, what do you say to the 50,001st person who

comes here having been raped, tortured or threatened with death? Do you tell them to go home to face further persecution?

How many people are allowed to stay?

- Official UK figures from 2002 show that 34 percent of applicants receive a positive decision on their case in the first instance (about 10 percent of applicants were granted refugee status and a quarter were given exceptional leave to remain – in other words the government recognised that they were in need of protection). Successful appeals bring the total to 50%. Other asylum seekers are given leave to remain following further appeals or because the Home Office concedes the case.
- The fact that a claim is turned down does not mean that a person does not have a good reason to be in the UK. The government for instance regularly turned down claims from Iraqi Kurds before the war with Iraq on the basis that the north of the country was safe. At the same time we were told that Saddam Hussein was a threat to the stability of the Middle East. The government also now considers Afghanistan to be safe despite overwhelming evidence to the contrary. People fleeing civil war do not meet the criteria set out in the Refugee Convention but still have compelling humanitarian needs.
- Latest figures from Glasgow City Council (January 2003) show that 85 percent of asylum seekers living in Glasgow who have received a decision on their case have been recognised as refugees and allowed to remain in the UK. Today's asylum seekers are tomorrow's Scottish citizens. They should be welcomed and helped to integrate.

Overcrowding is not an issue in Scotland

- Scotland's population is in decline. The 2001 census estimated Scotland's population to be just over 5 million. The population had fallen by 2% compared to 1981. The number of Scots under 15 fell by 18 percent.
- In a speech on February 25 2003 Scotland's First Minister Jack McConnell made it clear that there is an urgent need to attract people to Scotland in order to boost the economy.
- A report by Edinburgh-based firm Ralph International Investors entitled "Scotland the Grave" was released in April 2003 – it draws attention to the potentially damaging economic effects of a falling and rapidly ageing population.
- It should also be noted that many people are choosing to leave Britain. It is estimated that some 2 million people left the UK permanently between 1991 and 2000 (source: Annual abstract of Statistics). Home Office statistics show that 300,000 people emigrated from Britain in 2000 (the last year for which figures are available). According to Spain's National Institute for Statistics, 94,860 UK citizens were residing in Spain at the end of 2002.
- There is scope for taking in refugees. In actual fact we need people to help support an ageing population.

Refugees have a contribution to make to Scottish society

- Many refugees are professionals whose skills are desperately needed in Scotland. The Scottish Refugee Council is for instance running schemes to help retrain refugees who are also doctors, nurses and teachers. Several refugee doctors are already working in hospitals in Glasgow. Dozens more are undergoing training. The NHS is facing a shortage of skills and is recruiting abroad when people who have the skills we require are often living on our doorstep.
- The private sector in Scotland is also eager to employ refugees. Highlands and Islands Enterprise have said they would like more asylum seekers to be located in the north of Scotland where local companies find it difficult to fill vacancies. According to Scottish Enterprise Glasgow there is a need for an additional 27,000 skilled construction workers in Scotland by 2005. We have civil engineers living here as asylum seekers who could work in that sector. Instead the private sector has to recruit abroad at great expense.

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- It is absurd for the Westminster government to prevent asylum seekers from working. Not only are we depriving ourselves of their skills, we are forcing them to live on benefit when they could be working and paying taxes. Allowing asylum seekers to work would be an easy way for the government to save money.

Asylum seekers and terrorism

- A small number of asylum seekers have been arrested in connection with suspected acts of terrorism. The Scottish Refugee Council does not in any way condone terrorism. We do however believe in the fundamental principle of our judicial system that you are innocent until proven guilty.
- On several occasions, high profile arrests have been made only for the people detained to be released at a later stage without charge. The decision not to press charges usually warrants at most a few lines in the press.
- The acts of individuals should not be used to judge asylum seekers as a group or to influence policy.
- Asylum seekers are fingerprinted on arrival and often have to report regularly to police stations. People considered to be a security threat can be detained. Applying for asylum would appear to be a particularly poor strategy for anyone intent on breaking the law.

Politicians and the media should stop scapegoating refugees and deal with facts

- There is a huge amount of inaccurate and misleading information published in certain sections of the press. The press have a responsibility to provide the public with information and should not be publishing consistently negative coverage about people who have a right to be in the UK under international law.
- Equally, politicians should base their policies on facts and informed debate and not try to make political capital out of refugee issues.
- Newspapers and politicians should learn from mistakes made in the past. The Daily Mail which has a hostile stance towards asylum seekers today was for instance also hostile towards Jews fleeing nazi Germany.
- Groups subjected to persecution have been coming here for centuries. In the 17th century some 100,000 Huguenots (French protestants) fled their country and settled in Britain. Hundreds of thousands of Eastern Europeans came to this country fleeing fascism then communism during and after the second World War. 70,000 Ugandan Asians persecuted by Idi Amin came to Britain in 1972. Contrary to what we are sometimes told, asylum seekers do not pose an unprecedented threat.