

Attn: News Desks
Embargoed: 0000 January 19 2007

MEDIA RELEASE

QUALITY OF LEGAL ADVICE FOR ASYLUM SEEKERS

Good quality legal advice for asylum seekers, provided by properly trained and regulated practitioners, is essential if fair and just decisions are to be made under the New Asylum Model, Scottish Refugee Council will say at their AGM on Friday.

The New Asylum Model, the procedure introduced by the UK Government last year for processing asylum claims, hopes to improve the quality and speed of initial decisions being made on asylum claims, and consequently reduce the number of appeals and make the overall asylum process faster.

Under this new system, it is intended that initial decisions on asylum seekers' claims will be made within one month, as opposed to two months under the old regime. By April 2007, when all new cases will be processed under the new model, it is planned that 35 per cent of claims will be concluded within six months, with 60 per cent by December 2008.

Sally Daghlian, Chief Executive, Scottish Refugee Council, said:

“Getting the decision right first time is something Scottish Refugee Council has been calling for, so we welcome the New Asylum Model’s focus on improving the quality of initial decisions. However, the new procedure depends for its success on the number and availability of well-trained legal advisers.

“Few other areas of law have been subject to the same level of legislation as immigration and asylum, and there is another bill in the pipeline. So much change is challenging, therefore it is vitally important that the legal advisers receive appropriate, up-to-date training, or the new system risks falling at the first hurdle.”

Désiré Ruragaragaza, Scottish Refugee Council Board Member and originally an advocate from Burundi, said:

“The reality of accessing quality legal advice during the asylum process can be difficult and daunting for asylum seekers. Bad advice and representation can mean the difference between the prospect of a new and safe life and being

returned to persecution. Proper legal advice is the crux of a fair and just asylum system.”

Suzanne McCarthy, Immigration Services Commissioner, Office of the Immigration Services Commissioner (OISC), said:

“It is extremely important that people seek out an authorised immigration adviser who is properly regulated and will be up to date with the law. Far too often we come across cases where illegal advisers promise asylum seekers swift resolutions to their cases, but instead disappear with the client's money and documents, which can have a serious effect on their claim.”

End

Notes to Editors:

- Scottish Refugee Council AGM & Public Meeting will take place at Council Chamber, Edinburgh City Chambers, High Street, Edinburgh, EH1 1YJ on Friday January 19, 2-4pm.
- Also speaking will be **Nuala Mole**, Director, Advice on Individual Rights in Europe (AIRE), talking about her experience of taking cases to the European Court of Human Rights.
- The Office of the Immigration Services Commissioner (OISC) is an independent public body set up under the Immigration and Asylum Act 1999 (Part v) to ensure that immigration advisers are fit and competent and act in the best interests of their clients. www.oisc.gov.uk
- The New Asylum Model aims to improve the quality of initial decisions being made on new asylum claims. According to Home Office figures, in the period July - Sept 2006, 9% of asylum claims were granted at the initial decision stage, with 20% allowed on appeal. For more information see <http://www.ind.homeoffice.gov.uk/aboutus/newsarchive/nam>
- To attend the AGM or to arrange interviews with the speakers, please contact **Aideen McLaughlin on 0141 223 7927/07734 030 763.**