Britain: Asylum seekers protest persecution

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After handing over $10,000 to a human trafficker on the Iranian-Turkish border, Ozra picked up her false passport and opened the accompanying plane ticket to see which safe country she was going to be flying to. It turned out to be Britain, but she would be flying from Istanbul.

On the night of September 1, 2002, Ozra and her 16-year-old daughter attempted to cross into Turkey by foot. Ozra made it, but the guards heard them both and started shooting indiscriminately in all directions. She became separated from her daughter and it would be six months before they saw one another again.

Her conversion from Islam to Christianity five years earlier had sealed her fate, she told me. Although Christians are allowed to live and worship in Iran, they do not enjoy the same rights and freedoms as the rest of society. The price of conversion was regular visits to her home by the police and intimidation. But the British Home Office has not accepted her plea for asylum. Her application was turned down nine months after her arrival. She is now only permitted to stay until her daughter's case is heard.

Said is an Iraqi Kurd who started out as an actor, trained to be a primary school teacher, but ended up being a baker after the authorities had him expelled from college because he took part in a "political" play. He arrived in the UK on August 5, 2000. His trip had been a long one. He got a lift to the Iranian border and from there walked over to Turkey in nine days. He then arranged for $5,500 to be smuggled to a safe country. He had no idea where he was travelling to until six days later, when the lorry doors opened and everyone was speaking English.

The United Nations High Commission for Refugees estimates that there are around 20 million people internationally seeking asylum. Of that number, 110,700 applied for asylum in the UK in 2002. This means that the UK receives less than 1 percent of the world's refugee population.

According to a study released on January 20 of this year by the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), with 110,700 applications the UK topped a list of highly developed countries, taking in almost a third of the European Union's (EU's) asylum seekers and 30,000 more than the second-place United States. In terms of the size of its population, however, the UK was only eighth in the list, receiving 1.9 asylum applications for every 1,000 inhabitants, compared to Austria's 4.6, Norway's 3.9, Sweden's 3.7, Switzerland's 3.7 and Ireland's 3.1.

Despite these figures and the evidence that they are based on, the Labour government of Prime Minister Tony Blair is dead set against allowing more asylum seekers to enter the country. At the end of November 2003, the government unveiled proposals in its new Asylum Bill to strip failed asylum seekers of their benefits unless they took a free flight home. Their children could be taken into care if such action resulted in the family becoming destitute. The Commons Home Affairs Committee backs the principle behind the plan but is worried that the additional costs of making basic provision for these children could put an unnecessary strain on local authorities. The fact that these children could be separated from their families is of secondary importance.

On January 22, the government announced that beginning in March, travellers from five East African countries (Djibouti, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Tanzania and Uganda) would be fingerprinted before they enter the UK in an attempt to tackle supposedly unfounded asylum claims from Somalis. The move follows a six-month trial in which Sri Lankan visitors were fingerprinted. During this time, only seven asylum applicants who destroyed their passports after entering the country were detected—just over one a month. There are no figures readily available to indicate how much money was wasted on this unnecessary process, but it is still being extended.

The treatment of asylum seekers by both the government and large parts of the media is forcing some to resort to desperate measures in order to stay. One notable case is that of Abbas Amini, who in May 2003 stitched up his eyes, ears and lips for 11 days to protest against the country's asylum regulations and the treatment of those waiting to hear if they would be granted refugee status.

As his protest ended and the Home Office was forced to accept his refugee status, Sam Azad of the International Federation of Iranian Refugees read out a poem that Abbas had written explaining the reasons for his actions. "He sewed up his lips so he could speak out. He sewed up his eyes to make others see. He sewed up his ears to make others hear. You whose eyes, ears and mouth are free can hear and speak out."

A political poet and partisan, Abbas fled from prison in Iran in August 2001, leaving his wife and two children behind. It was not as though he had any choice. He had served 10 years of a 22-year sentence, which he says was handed down because of his opposition to the government. He fled to Turkey and from there managed to smuggle himself over to Greece, where he stayed for eight months. He then hid on a boat going to Italy and took a train to France, locking himself in the toilets for most of the journey north. He reached England by strapping himself to the bottom of a truck going through the Channel Tunnel. In Dover, he gave himself up to the authorities and claimed asylum.

After two years of living in Nottingham, and seven months after being granted leave to remain, Abbas is now trying to arrange for his family to stay, but he has had no word whether this will be possible. He lives on his own in a flat near the centre of Nottingham, and has been told by his doctor that he has post-traumatic stress disorder—as is the case with many asylum seekers—and should not work. He is only 33 years old.

Between January 9 and January 11 of this year, more than 30 people, half of them asylum seekers and refugees, took part in a 48-hour fast on the premises of St. Peter's Church in Nottingham city centre in protest at the treatment of asylum seekers. Organised by the Nottingham and Nottinghamshire Refugee Forum (NNRF), the fast was aimed at raising public awareness about the destitution faced by thousands of asylum seekers in the UK because of the country's immigration laws.

In particular they were protesting against Section 55 of the Nationality, Immigration and Asylum Act, which came into force on January 8, 2003. Under this section of the act, asylum seekers cannot expect financial support unless they can satisfy the Home Office that they applied for asylum "as soon as reasonably practical," which in reality means within three days of entering the UK.

Section 55 has been described as "legally and morally wrong" by Habib Rahman, chief executive of the Joint Council for the Welfare of

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Immigrants, who commented that "through this law, the government has attacked the most marginalised section of our society, many of whom are already traumatised due to strife and war; and has relegated them to sleeping under dustbins and begging for food."

Shelter, the charity that campaigns against homelessness, has repeatedly warned that denying support to destitute people will cause homelessness and force asylum applicants onto the streets, undermining "the government's policies to tackle rough sleeping and reduce social exclusion."

The Refugee Council warned the government that it would not be able to provide support for the hundreds of people who would be left destitute because of the Act. "It is intolerable that this is happening in a country which has a proud tradition of providing sanctuary to victims of human rights abuses," said one of its spokesmen.

The government hopes that these draconian measures will slash the number of people coming into the UK to claim asylum. But most asylum seekers do not even know that they are fleeing to the UK until the lorry doors are opened. All they know is that they have paid to be smuggled to a "safe country." It could be anywhere in the European Union.

Most of those asylum seekers taking part in the Nottingham fast were Kurdish and had arrived in the UK under similar circumstances. They had made their way to a Turkish port, usually Istanbul, and had slept down by the harbour for a few days while they waited to meet those lorry drivers who were willing to take risks—and gain up to $20,000—for transporting a family to a safe country. They then spent up to 11 days cooped up in the back of a truck with perhaps a dozen others hoping to start a new life. They were never told where they were being taken or given any guarantees that they would get there. With Kurds regularly being denied ID cards and passports from their home countries, fleeing the border illegally was their only option.

Between July and September 2003—the last figures that the Home Office has released—2,810 asylum seekers were judged ineligible for financial support, an increase of over 50 percent on the previous quarter. Around one in five asylum seekers is turned down for financial assistance.

From July to September, there were 11,955 asylum applications made in the UK, an increase of 13 percent on the previous quarter, according to the Home Office, but just half the figure for the same period in 2002. On average, one in every five applicants was from Iran, Iraq or Turkey, and was likely to be Kurdish. Furthermore, according to the Home Office's statistics, of the nine government regional offices in England dealing with asylum subsistence, the East Midlands—which includes the cities of Nottingham, Leicester and Derby—is awarding either subsistence and support or financial aid under the National Asylum Support Service (NASS) to just 5,040 asylum seekers out of a total of 43,580. Only three other regional offices—based in the East of England, the South East and the South West—are providing less support. There are no accurate figures for how many asylum seekers there might be the UK that have not registered their application and are therefore living on their own means, but it is certainly a multiple of the total number receiving assistance.

Despite the speed with which the government now boasts it is turning down applications, many asylum seekers can wait years for their claims to be adjudicated. Without sufficient—or any—financial aid, they are forced to live rough and rely on handouts to survive. Gary Freeman, a member of the NNRF and one of the organisers of the fast, said that a local Methodist church is issuing between 15 to 18 food parcels per week to asylum seekers in Nottingham who otherwise face starvation. It costs the church around £100 per week to supply these people with basic necessities. Even then, admits one of the organisers, all the food is tinned because buying fresh fruit and vegetables would overshoot the budget of around £6 per parcel.

One asylum seeker who had been denied financial assistance was sleeping in recycling bins, said Freeman, as asylum seekers are barred from night shelters because they are not technically homeless. There is no shortage of such stories. A 50-year-old Kosovan asylum seeker in Nottingham recently had his support taken away, and he now sleeps in a corridor in a housing agency at night. Staff allows him to sleep there as he has a serious mental illness. A Palestinian asylum seeker has been forced to sleep rough in allotment sheds because he is ineligible for financial support under Section 55. An Iraqi asylum seeker has received no financial support for the entire nine months that he has been based in Nottingham. His only possessions are the clothes that he arrived in.

Even those asylum seekers receiving aid are not free from problems. Waiting in limbo for years in the hope of a positive adjudication, many are suffering from stress, psychological problems and illness through poor diet and living conditions.

Ibrahim, a Turkish Kurd, was one of the oldest of the fasters. He arrived in England three years ago and moved to Nottingham in 2002 after spending a year in London. He lives north of the city centre in a house in Hyson Green with his wife and four children. He was forced to leave Turkey because he was being persecuted by the Turkish police for being a Kurd, and for allegedly paying money and giving shelter to Kurdish guerrillas in eastern Turkey. His claim for refugee status was refused over a year ago, but his wife's claim has yet to be heard.

Through the NASS, the six of them live on just under £800 per month to buy food, clothes and anything else they need. He spent over 15 times that amount—more than his total annual support—for him and his family to be smuggled to a safe country. The money came from the grocery store he was forced to sell in Turkey. He is frightened to return home and is sure that he will be imprisoned or killed if he goes back.

Mazlum, another Turkish Kurd whose younger daughter was born in Britain nearly two years ago, has also had his application for refugee status turned down. The adjudicator overseeing his case denied him leave to remain as a refugee, but said that he should be treated for his post-traumatic stress disorder before being returned to Turkey, caused by severe torture at the hands of the Turkish police, prison guards and army, as well as by the difficulties of trying to prove his claim. The Home Office stepped in and said that it was not within the adjudicator's powers to recommend medical treatment, and so the whole process is set to start again. Mazlum has been living in Nottingham for three years so far.

Mazlum, Ibrahim and others are puzzled as to how the UK can criticise the human rights records of countries like Turkey for their treatment of Kurdish minorities, while refusing to accept their oppression once they arrive pleading for asylum. An Iraqi Kurd called Jasim who was awarded refugee status and leave to remain in June 2001 told me, "The main countries where asylum seekers are coming from, such as Iran, Iraq, Turkey and China, are well known here for their human rights abuses and the UK government has criticised these regimes. If the government knows about these abuses, why is it then so difficult to grant these people refugee status?"

NOTE: Cheques for donations towards the destitution fund are payable to NNRF and should be addressed to the Treasurer, NNRF, 118 Mansfield Road, Nottingham, NG1 3HL.

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