

Britain: 19 Chinese workers drown working on slave labour gang

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The deaths of 19 young workers from China whilst picking cockles (a type of clam) in Morecambe Bay expose the appalling risks that thousands of asylum seekers and immigrants must take in order to survive. The Blair government is seeking to wash its hands of any responsibility for the fate of these workers and their families. But it is its anti-asylum and immigration policies that are driving thousands of workers into the clutches of ruthless criminal gangs who are only too ready to exploit their destitution.

This latest tragedy occurred late in the evening of February 5. The tide came in at speed, drowning 17 men and two women. Sixteen survivors were rescued. Eight of the dead are from the Fujian province in southeastern China, where people can pay up to £20,000 to snakeheads—a criminal gang made up of ex-military types typically adorned with tattoos from which their name is derived—who smuggle them out to Western Europe. Workers from this province make up the largest wave of undocumented Chinese migrants to Britain.

At 9.30pm, someone dialled 999 and told police that about 25 people were stranded on the sands. The Lancaster helicopter and two helicopters from RAF Valley in north Wales were scrambled and began a search alongside police from Lancashire and Cumbria. Mountain rescuers and firefighters also joined the search, which was hampered by force six winds and the incoming tide.

Harry Roberts, commander of Morecambe's Royal National Lifeboat Institute (RNLI) hovercraft, realised that he was facing the worst tragedy he had known. "Almost immediately we found a body. As we came back, we came across a patch of eight or nine people, all dead. It looked like a dreadful accident had happened. There were bodies all over the sandbank. We were taking bodies back four at a time to the lifeboat station. This was an extraordinary night. Such a waste of life."

Morecambe Bay is the second largest bay in Britain after the Wash, covering 120 square miles. When the tide comes in, it courses at up to ten miles per hour through a network of gullies and inlets. Escape is almost impossible as the saturated mud sucks at the feet and impassable waterways are formed. Some of the bodies were found up to four miles away upstream.

Cedric Robinson, the sand pilot of Morecambe Bay for 42 years, has described it as "the wet Sahara". He explains in *Sand Walker—A Lifetime on Morecambe Bay*, "There are large hidden holes scoured out by the incoming tide, known as melgraves. The water and air beneath the surface of the holes creates the worst quicksands. They can set round a person like cement. Struggling

only sucks the victim in further."

Jabez Lam of the Chinese rights group Min Quan told the *Guardian* newspaper, "This was a tragedy waiting to happen. This is a situation created by the government's immigration policy. They are denying people the right to decent living conditions, and the right to work and housing. These people have put themselves at risk to make a living."

The sands of Morecambe Bay are said to contain up to £8 million worth of cockles at any one time. The shellfish sell for £600 a ton, particularly in Spain where they are in huge demand. Gang masters can earn up to £1,500 a day from the trade. There are no restrictions on harvesting the cockles and the tools and methods used are primitive and inexpensive—much the same as they were in the Roman times. The cockles are gathered into heaps with a short rake and then sieved.

The emphasis is on minimising labour costs. Illegal immigrants and asylum seekers who are denied benefits and legal employment are easy prey. They are also inexperienced and willing to stay out far longer than those with a better knowledge of the area's dangers.

Last September a Commons Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Select Committee report painted a bleak picture of conditions for migrants working in the unregulated black economy. Gang masters were said to create "a culture of fear" and to often neglect workers' safety and general welfare.

Cambridgeshire Citizens Advice Bureau told the committee that migrant farm workers were being housed in partitioned containers, without running water, and were forced to pay back £100 to their employers if they left their jobs.

In July 2003, three migrants who were travelling to pick spring onions died when their van—reportedly driven by a man who could not understand English—passed a warning sign at a level crossing and was struck by a train.

Gang masters, often based in the Merseyside area, hire hundreds of illegal Chinese immigrants on slave wages. Accounts vary of how much the workers are paid for their labour. The *Sunday Mirror* newspaper quoted £1 for a nine-hour day whilst other articles reported £11 per sack of cockles. A dealer pays a gang master £15 per bag of cockles, out of which the worker's £11 comes. But this is only part of the story. From the £11 the gang master takes another £2-£3 for unspecified "administration fees". As well as charging a registration fee of £150, some gang masters deduct rent from workers' wages.

In the aftermath of this terrible tragedy police raided a number of Chinese workers' homes in the Kensington area of Liverpool. Detective Superintendent Gradwell said workers were living in "appalling conditions" with up to 40 people in four or five bedroom houses, mattresses on the floor, no heating and little food.

Five men and two women who were among the survivors were arrested on suspicion of manslaughter two days later.

Home Secretary David Blunkett has responded to the tragedy by backing an already tabled private members bill to regulate the cockling trade. But the government's standard response of stepping up anti-immigration measures and policing initiatives continues, included establishment of a national police force to deal with trafficking.

No measures are proposed to alleviate the terrible social and political conditions that drive tens of thousands to risk their lives in order to seek asylum and a safe home for themselves and their families.

It was only four years ago that 58 men and women Baihu village in Fujian province suffocated in the back of a tomato lorry bound for Dover from Zeebrugge in Belgium. It is quite likely that some of the dead in the Morecambe Bay tragedy are from the same area.

A recent report from Baihu by *Guardian* journalist Jonathan Watts described conditions in the village as follows:

"Baihu is among the most squalid places in China—a village of rutted roads, dank housing and washing lines filled with torn children's clothing. It is a place the Chinese economic miracle has passed by. Since the closure of several factories in the 1990s, locals estimate the unemployment rate to be over 50 percent. Most families, they say, depend on a son or a daughter who is working illegally overseas...

"For [one] old man and his wife, who live on less than £20 a month, that income can make the difference between survival and destitution. That much is apparent from the families who lost an overseas breadwinner in Dover."

A coroner has set up a commission to identify the Chinese cockle pickers who died, but this may take weeks even if it proves possible.

This appalling tragedy not only highlights the desperation of those seeking safe haven in Britain, but also the official persecution of the majority of those fortunate enough to make it.

Just over a year ago, on January 8, 2003, the government implemented Section 55 of the Nationality, Immigration and Asylum Act 2002, allowing the home office to withdraw all support from those who do not apply for asylum "as soon as reasonably practicable" after entering the UK.

In its report on the impact of the legislation, the Refugee Council explains that the regulation has been used to "deny access to basic state support to people who have applied for asylum within days and sometimes even within hours of arrival."

The council quotes the claim by Home Office Minister Beverley Hughes that the "vast majority of those who are refused support do not become destitute, finding support from friends, family or community or charity groups."

It surveyed 130 representatives of such organisations and found that Section 55 is, "forcing many asylum seekers into destitution and placing an unsustainable burden on the voluntary sector and

refugee community."

- 77 percent of respondents have seen clients sleeping rough as a result of being refused support under Section 55. Respondents mentioned rubbish bins, phone booths, and bus shelters as places where asylum seekers have taken shelter at night.

- 65 percent of respondents have had to give emergency provisions or money for food or essential items to asylum seekers refused support under Section 55. Many individuals reported having to provide money from their own pockets so that the asylum seekers could eat.

- 55 percent said they, or members of their community, had to provide emergency shelter for asylum seekers, of which 70 percent accommodated people in their own homes or those of community members.

- 88 percent of respondents said they did not have funding to pay for the cost of services they are providing to asylum seekers denied support under Section 55.

On January 31, in a case brought by the homeless charity Shelter, Justice Maurice Kay ruled that the "degrading treatment" threshold had been reached in the cases of three men refused benefits under Section 55. The three had fallen into circumstances where their human rights had been infringed. Kay said that denial of employment and access to other benefits during the protracted period in which asylum applications were determined would reduce one man to "a state of destitution".

"Without accommodation, food or the means to obtain them, he will have little alternative but to beg or resort to crime. Many, like the claimants in this case, will have little choice but to beg and sleep rough." The applicants had been forced into "a life so destitute that no civilised nation could tolerate it," Kay said.

A Shelter representative said, "All three people were malnourished and forced to beg for food and to sleep rough; and one man was left no option but to defecate in a park.

"Evidence given by Shelter illustrates that there is virtually no charitable provision available to people denied support as a result of Section 55; most hostel beds are paid for by housing benefit, which is not available to asylum seekers."

A report by Amnesty International says that many asylum decisions taken by the Home Office are flawed and wrong refusals send thousands of people to possible torture. One hundred and seventy refusal letters show inaccurate information and a "negative culture". According to government figures, in 2002 one in five appeals to the Home Office—or nearly 14,000—were overturned. This figure rises to nearly four in ten cases from Somalia, and more than one in three in Sudanese and Eritrean asylum applications.

A report by the Greater London Authority accuses Blunkett of "destitution by design", and of leaving 10,000 asylum seekers on the streets of London in the last year alone.



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