

Britain: Gifted young footballer fights deportation

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Alhassan Bangura, a gifted 19-year-old footballer who plays for Watford Football Club near London, is fighting attempts by the Labour government to deport him back to his birthplace in the west African country of Sierra Leone. Bangura claimed asylum when he came to the UK at the age of 15, but the Home Office insists the rules say his “right to remain” expired when he reached the age of 18.

Born in the capital Freetown, Bangura fled Sierra Leone following the murder of his father who had been chief of the Poro, an ancient tribal organisation involved in religious ceremonies. Bangura says that as the son of a chief he became next in line, but when he refused to get involved he was threatened. The matter is made more complicated by reports of how the murderous Revolutionary United Front rebels exploited Poro symbolism during the bloody civil war (1991-2002), which resulted in the deaths of over 200,000 people, a million refugees and thousands of others who suffered amputations and rapes.

Fearing for his life, Bangura escaped to Guinea where he met a Frenchman who said he would help him get to France. Once there he was sold into prostitution and raped. It was only when he was taken to England that he managed to escape and seek asylum.

Bangura initially won the “right to remain” in June 2007, but his case was thrown out after the Home Office vindictively spotted a legal mistake in the judge’s summing up. On December 11 he lost an appeal against a deportation order. However, as a result of a persistent campaign by supporters, Immigration Minister Liam Byrne has taken the unusual step of setting up a panel to consider his case for a work permit. Angura is allowed to remain in the UK while he applies for a work permit, during which time his appeal against deportation back to Sierra Leone will also be considered.

Watford Labour MP Claire Ward has backed Bangura’s campaign, although local people have contrasted this with her slavish defence of government policies, including those on immigration for which she been rewarded with the party whip in the House Commons. Ward said, “We’ve won a concession from the Home Office that Watford Football Club will apply for a work permit as an exceptional case, without Al having to leave the UK.

“Because Al wouldn’t qualify automatically for a work permit then his case will be considered by an independent panel, which will include members of the Home Office and members of the football world.

“They will consider the criteria and his track record and what he brings to the game and then recommend to the Home Office whether he should be allowed to have the work permit. Essentially what the minister and the Home Office have done is open up a new route by which we hope Al will be allowed to stay in the UK,” Ward added.

Bangura still faces difficulties. To qualify for a work permit a footballer must have played a number of games in his national side, which has to be ranked in the top 70 by the international football association FIFA. Coming to the UK at the age of 15 as a refugee means there is no way Bangura could have won any caps for Sierra Leone, which, in any case, is

ranked at number 156.

His plight has received broad sympathy from players, staff and thousands of fans from Watford FC and other football clubs. An online petition set up by supporters has gained 10,000 signatures and he was given a standing ovation by both sets of fans at a recent Watford game against Plymouth Argyle. Stephane Burchkalter, secretary general of the African section of FIFpro, the world organisation representing footballers, and former Watford club owner Elton John have also added their support.

Watford Manager Aidy Boothroyd, who has testified at appeal hearings for Bangura, said, “After the immigration hearing, I said I had faith in British Justice but obviously I was totally mistaken because it is a completely ludicrous decision.... We have a young man here who pays his taxes, has a fiancée and a newborn son and somebody thinks it’s a good idea to send him back to Sierra Leone. We’ve been sent a document with the reasons why he’s being deported and they are ridiculous.”

Alhassan spoke to the *Watford Observer* explaining how he first learnt of the Home Office decision to deport him. He woke up one morning to find a letter on his doormat and couldn’t understand why they wanted to send him back.

“I’m doing everything right. I’m here, I have my family and my job—I’m not doing anyone any harm. I’m happy to be here, I see this as my home, my country. I would love to be a citizen here, if I was given the chance to be British I would take it with both hands. I am just praying every night that the Home Secretary will review this and allow me to stay, because inside of me, I know I’m supposed to be here,” he explained.

“My fiancée is very, very disappointed. We’ve just had our first baby and this should be a happy time for us both. Instead, she’s very down at the moment and I have to look after her and make sure she’s ok as well as the baby.

“But she’s a fantastic mother, she’s been great with Samal and it’s fantastic to have him here.”

Bangura’s case is just the tip of the iceberg of a brutal system. It has thrown a rare spotlight on the plight of refugees and asylum-seekers, rarely worth a mention by politicians and a media more concerned with witch-hunting the most vulnerable sections of society and blaming them for its problems.

In another recent case a high court judge ordered Home Secretary Jacqui Smith to bring back a 15-year-old refugee deported to Austria, his first port of call in Europe after coming from his birthplace Iraq. The Home Office justified the removal of the child from his foster parents’ home in a dawn raid by stating that Richmond social services department might tip the boy off to his threatened deportation. The boy spent a night at a police station in Austria before spending three nights wandering the streets, until he was let in to a hostel for adults.

The judge condemned his treatment saying, “That is a disgraceful approach. I find no possible justification for that.”

“To bundle someone out—a vulnerable minor—by going round without any warning at four o’clock in the morning is, I think, arguably

disgraceful,” he declared.

Under the Geneva Convention on Human Rights, governments are obliged to admit unaccompanied children seeking asylum. But increasingly Britain’s Labour government has overridden international law. It has become routine for young people to be detained and deported once they reach the age of 18. Many face return to a country of which they know little, may not even speak the language and have no surviving family or friends to help them. The government has turned a blind eye to the fact that many of the deportees face torture, death squads, arrest and jail.

According to charity groups, Labour’s policy has created a “humanitarian disaster” where many refugees have no access to legal representation, legal aid has been cut or is unavailable and some lawyers have no experience in immigration laws. In some cases solicitors are given barely 24 hours to prepare cases, many of which are complicated and require extensive research.

Despite lurid headlines in the media about Britain “being swamped,” recent figures show that asylum applications have dropped to 23,610, the lowest level for 14 years, and deportations are up by 17 percent from 2006 to 45,000—“every eight minutes” ministers are quick to trumpet.

And the Labour government is dramatically stepping up the pressure on “illegal” immigrants in Britain from next February. Byrne declares that by the end of next year the immigration system “will have changed out of all recognition.” All ten of the Immigration Acts passed since the early 1970s are to be replaced with a new Immigration Bill. It means three quarters of the world’s population will need fingerprint visas and ID cards if they want to come to the UK. A points-based system will limit new entrants to those who have skills that British capitalism wants or who are rich enough to support themselves. The new single UK Border Agency will have increased powers to prevent entry, carry out deportations and raid workplaces. Employers who unknowingly hire illegal workers could face a maximum fine of £10,000 for each worker found on their premises and those who employ someone deliberately could incur an unlimited fine and imprisonment. Additional measures will raise from 18 to 21 the age at which a foreigner can come to the UK to get married and block citizenship to anyone with a criminal record.

The right-wing media are demanding more people be barred from entry and that those here be deported. Much of the hysteria invokes the “war on terror” and the so-called threat to Britain’s security to demand foreign prisoners are automatically deported to their countries of origin, even after they have served their sentences. Immigrants cleared by the Home Office’s Security Industry Authority are sacked from their jobs as security guards, where most of them are forced to spend long and lonely hours patrolling warehouses, factories and offices for the minimum wage. Shadow home secretary David Davis is now accusing the government of carrying out a “stealth amnesty” that will allow 160,000 “illegal” immigrants to stay and rants that “after 18 months effort and on their own numbers ... it will take decades to remove the backlog.”

Of course, the liberal media cannot be seen to be so crudely xenophobic, so their arguments for more controls are framed in terms of a “concern” for working people. The *Observer* and the *Guardian* have both encouraged and promoted Labour’s policy shift on immigration, using a variant of the right-wing’s favourite device—the claim that it is impossible to maintain a welfare state because people are only willing to share things with those who have a common culture and values. These views dovetail with a tendency in the Labour Party that calls for stronger measures to curb immigration, claiming this is the key to combating the growth of the British National Party. Its most vocal representative, Dagenham MP John Cruddas, argues that support for the fascists can be attributed to the legitimate grievances of white workers aroused by illegal immigration and false asylum claims, together with welfare policies that also discriminate against the “white working class.”

In this way, the fascist threat becomes the pretext for the adoption of yet more right-wing social policies by Labour. Immigrants and asylum-seekers are offered up as scapegoats for all manner of social grievances created by ever-worsening social inequality, the decimation of social provision such as the National Health Service and council house shortages for which Labour is responsible.

And what of the future for Al Bangura should he lose his right to remain in the UK?

Sierra Leone is portrayed as a Western success story, especially for Britain and former Prime Minister Tony Blair. British troops intervened in the country in 2000 and this was followed by a build-up of over 17,000 United Nations troops. Since then, Britain has effectively run the civil and military administration of the country and provided the most aid—some £40 million (US\$76 million) in 2006. In July 2007, the Home Office added Sierra Leone to its “white list” of safe countries where asylum applications are assumed to be unfounded and applicants have to go back to their country of origin to make an appeal.

However, the humanitarian organisation Human Rights Watch reported last year, “Since the end of Sierra Leone’s brutal armed conflict in 2002, few improvements have been made in the dynamics that contributed to the emergence of the conflict in 1991—rampant corruption, gross public financial mismanagement, inadequate distribution of the country’s natural resources, and weak rule of law. The government’s failure to address crushing poverty despite massive international aid, and alarmingly high unemployment rates among youth, render Sierra Leone vulnerable to future instability.”

The report says the government has made very little effort to implement most recommendations of a Truth and Reconciliation Commission set up after the civil war and has rejected others, including abolition of the death penalty. The Sierra Leone police and army “have been a longstanding source of considerable instability, corruption, and human rights violations, and have enjoyed near-complete immunity from prosecution.” There are “striking defects” within the judicial system, which “severely undermine” the rights of victims and the accused, including extortion and bribery, long delays assigning lawyers in some cases up to five years, the procurement of statements under duress, detention without charges as well as numerous deaths in custody.

Sierra Leone is the world’s poorest country, with a life expectancy of 34 years and a quarter of the country’s children dying before they reach five years of age.



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