

COMMITTEE TO DEFEND ASYLUM SEEKERS

NEWSLETTER Spring 2001

Unlikely radicals - Doctors oppose detention and vouchers

The British Medical Association (BMA) deplores the hardening of attitudes towards asylum seekers in this country. The BMA is opposed to the detention of asylum seekers and to the voucher scheme and is strongly critical of the way the dispersal of asylum seekers has been managed. Asylum seekers have been cut off from support and advice from existing refugee community groups and doctors have struggled to cope with the needs of vulnerable people arriving without warning, planning, or language support services.

In a report published on 24 April 2001 the BMA advises medical associations to object when individuals with a well-founded fear of persecution are sent back to situations of high risk. The report stresses that 'Not all forms of torture result in physical scars... It can take time and many interviews before incidences of torture or abuse are fully revealed, particularly where the abuse has been sexual in nature. Therefore, it is crucial that sufficient time is allowed to obtain crucial medical evidence...'

The BMA calls on national governments to enable evidence of torture to be identified as soon as possible so victims can receive appropriate medical treatment and counselling. Doctors are urged not to discriminate against asylum seekers who want to register with their practice. Training of doctors, specialist rehabilitative and interpreting services are also called for.

Kosova is not safe!

Besnik Gashi Must Stay

A CAMPAIGN has been launched in north London to stop the New Labour government sending a young refugee back to Kosovo. The British government is now threatening to send Besnik back to Mitrovica, an ethnically divided city in the north of Kosovo, which is plagued by violence. Besnick Gashi tells the story in his own words:

My family house was burnt down, and my mother and father were killed. I have a younger brother, but I do not know if he is dead or alive. I was 17 years old when I travelled in the back of a truck for days with two bottles of water and a little food. I did not know where I was going, but somehow I ended up in Haringey. Gradually I have tried to rebuild my life. I go to the College of North West London where I have many friends. My ambition is to go to university. But the government wants to deport me, and they have put me on vouchers because I am 18 now.

There is nothing for me in Kosovo except bad memories. Why is the government sending me back? If things are so peaceful in Kosovo now, as they say, then why are K-For troops still there? I think that there is an election coming in Britain, and the government wants to say to people that they are getting rid of asylum seekers. That is why they want to deport me. But I am going to fight to stay here."

Get petitions, leaflets, and send messages of support and donations to
Besnik Gashi Must Stay campaign
c/o Haringey Trades Council,

Trade Union Office
St Ann's Hospital
St Ann's Rd
London N15.

Stop Roma persecutions Release Mario Bango

On Monday, 23 April protests took place in front of a number of Slovak embassies, including Vienna, Prague and London, calling for the release of Mario Bango, an 18-year old Roma youth, who has been in detention in Slovakia since early March. He is threatened with up to 15 years in prison.

His crime? He defended his brother when he was brutally attacked by a Neo-nazi. The Nazi later died in hospital. Mario's family - as with many other Roma in Slovakia - was repeatedly attacked and threatened in the past. There has been an ongoing racist campaign in the Slovak Republic against Roma people. Now the authorities want to make an example of Mario. The Slovak parliament even held a minute's silence for the dead Nazi! The state prosecutor now wants to charge Mario with murder.

Committees in defence of Mario Bango have been formed in Slovakia, Czech Republic and in several countries: an international solidarity campaign is underway.

A court heard the prosecution case for charging Mario with murder on 25 April. At this time the judge's ruling is not known.

Send messages of support to:
Ustav na vykon vazby
Chorvatska 5
priecinok 1077
812 29 Bratislava
Slovakia

Please, send a donation to MRCI, National Westminster PLC (bank code: 60-20-31, 358 South Lambeth Road, A/c No: 28982630).

Sanctuary not Criminality Drop the Charges against Farrokh Shiri

Farrokh Shiri, is accused of using an imitation firearm with the intent of resisting arrest. (The firearm was completely harmless.)

Farrokh Shiri is an Iranian dissident, who was involved in assisting people deemed in danger from the Iranian regime to flee Iran. His group enabled approximately 80 people from political and religious groups to escape over a period of 14 years. He eventually had to leave Iran as his own life was in danger. He arrived in Britain in June 2000 and was refused asylum. On 7th March this year, Shiri discovered his appeal case for political asylum in Britain had been turned down and, in a very distressed state, threatened to take his own life. There was a four-hour siege by police before Shiri calmed down and was then arrested.

On Friday 4th May there will be a preliminary hearing when Shiri has asked people to pack the courtroom and demonstrate outside. We reprint an extract from his letter of last month:

Dear Friends

I was very happy when I read that lots of people work on our behalf. If we were not in deep trouble we would not have left our country and have to start again with nothing. I am very, very puzzled, in this country they say I am not allowed to kill myself, but on the other hand they want to return me to people who will kill me. "

15th March 2001

Please send a letter of support to

Farrokh Shiri
HMP Exeter
New North Road,
Exeter,
Devon
EX4 4EX

Demonstration in Support of Farrokh Shiri:
Called by:
Exeter Socialist Alliance,
South West National Civil Rights
Movement
National Coalition of Anti-Deportation
Campaigns
International Federation of Iranian Refugees
Bristol Campaign to Defend Asylum
Seekers

End the Vouchers

*The following are extracts from Oxfam's consultation prepared for New Labour's review of the Voucher system:

"It is our view that the voucher policy has failed on every point. The ridicule and criticism that the policy has attracted weighs heavily on Britain's shoulders and does untold damage to the government's attempts to build a more fair and just nation. The clamour for change from the Union movement, children's charities, human right's groups, community and church leaders together with thousands of ordinary people up and down the country cannot be ignored."

Bill Morris, General Secretary of T&G

"Vouchers are worth 70% of income support, amounting to just £36 54 per week for a single person, £10 of which is in cash. Vouchers are inherently discriminatory, marginalising those that use them and making them targets for abuse and harassment in the community."

David Bryer Director of OXFAM GB

"Vouchers say nothing of the oppression from which refugees flee. They are mute also when it comes to reminding us that, in helping the persecuted, the UK is making its

contribution to the fight for human rights. Vouchers isolate and mark out the most vulnerable in society as uninvited and unwanted. In doing so they strike at the heart of the concept of sanctuary."

Nick Hardwick Chief Exec. Of the Refugee Council

The report concludes with demands for a realistic cash based system of support and allowing asylum seekers to qualify for special needs provision. Not surprisingly pre-election, there is no sign of the outcome of the government's promised review of the voucher system.

- Extracted from *agenda* Spring 2001 The Newsletter of Race on the Agenda.

No help for unaccompanied asylum-seeking children

Unaccompanied child asylum seekers arrive in this country with no family, little spoken English and the painful memories of horrendous trauma. They may have seen parents and families tortured or killed and have endured terrifying journeys to reach this country. A report from the King's Fund states that the current system is causing depression and anxiety for people trying to rebuild their lives.

Under 16s are taken into care but 16 and 17 year olds, even those without adult support, are often abandoned in bed and breakfast accommodation with vouchers. A report by Barnardos last year found that three-quarters of local authorities had no policies for working with unaccompanied asylum seekers.

But there is worse to come. ²When an unaccompanied asylum seeker child reaches the age of 18, under the Immigration and Asylum Act 1999 they can be referred to the hated dispersal scheme. This means that even the minimum contacts and support they may have built up as a teenager will be lost when they are sent yet again to another

strange place which may be anywhere in the country.

The Refugee Council had 4762 referrals of unaccompanied minors between April 1999 and March 2000. They are demanding that the dispersal scheme be abolished so that 18 year old asylum seekers can receive the same support as any other young people leaving care.

¹ *Community Care* 'Does the Community Care?' Jan 25-31 2001.

² D. Woodhead *The Health and Well-being of Asylum Seekers and Refugees*, King's Fund 2000

New Labour's Anti-Racist Hypocrisy

The smug hypocrisy of the Labour Party in signing up to the Commission for Racial Equality's pledge not to play the race card in the run-up to the election is mind blowing. Just look at Jack Straw's recent announcements that he intends to increase the number of people deported to 30,000 and to push for dramatic changes to the 1951 Geneva Convention.

Politicians cause racial assaults - official

An article in *The Observer* on 22 April quoted official Police statistics indicating a significant increase in racist attacks following negative speeches by politicians about asylum seekers such as the recent one by William Hague.

Harmondsworth – Huge protest Planned

The close Down Harmondsworth Campaign is organising a huge protest to mark the opening of the new detention centre. Watch this place for more information.

Join the Committee to Defend Asylum Seekers

We meet regularly at Camden Town Hall. Visit our website:

www.defend-asylum.org

Contact: info@defend-asylum.org.uk