

Spring 2010

# The Zimbabwean Refugee Community in Leeds

## Living in Limbo

The UK Zimbabwean community petitioned 10 Downing Street asking that The Home Office accept that Zimbabweans cannot be safely removed to Zimbabwe and therefore they should be granted humanitarian protection and allowed to live and work in the UK. The disappointing response was merely that the Government does not comment on individual cases. In November 2009, Phil Woolas, the then Minister of State for Borders and Immigration, said that there would be a review in January 2010 of the situation in Zimbabwe. A decision was to be made on what to do about people who have not been granted leave to remain but who have not been removed to Zimbabwean, as it is not safe to return them.

There are many Zimbabweans who have claimed asylum as far back as 2002 who remain in this situation of 'limbo'. There are indications that these people will not be returned to Zimbabwe but without the pronouncement of an official position by the Government, this possibility remains and does nothing to end the fear and uncertainty that they live with on a daily basis. Owen Mtombeni and Taurai Cheteni feel that 'this situation in effect equates to torture. It is not possible to survive on Section 4 support of £35 per week for eight years. These people have lost touch with their families and their right to work has been taken from them. If they were given permission to work, they could fend for themselves here in the UK and enable them to provide support to their families who are still suffering in Zimbabwe. The endless waiting that people have to put up with has led some to accept assistance from the IOM to resettle in Zimbabwe but on return they have faced the same old problems from ZANUPF authorities. They have returned because they have been given no choice if they are to move on with their lives. They have suffered as a result and in effect, their human rights have been abused.'

'We are being treated as pawns in the party political game of winning votes with Labour and the Conservatives exchanging statement and counter statement as to what should be done with Zimbabwean asylum seekers. We have tried to make our voice heard here in the UK through demonstrations. When we do this, it causes problems for those of us who have to report to Waterside Court UKBA offices. Staff single out

Zimbabweans for harsh treatment, such as being inflexible if they report a little late. We met with the Archbishop of York in the hope that he might influence the Government to bring an early resolution to the situation. He expressed his intention to prevent the removal of asylum seekers back to Zimbabwe but without any decision by the Government, our hopes have been raised only to be dashed again as nothing has come of it.'

## What is Needed and How You Can Help

Owen asks that if you want to help Zimbabwean asylum seekers there are practical measures you can take. Without money, purpose or occupation, many asylum seekers spend their time isolated and alone in their accommodation. They can not integrate into life in the UK. You can invite someone to dinner or organise parcels to be sent to children in Zimbabwe. He believes that less is being done to support Zimbabweans in Leeds than in other parts of the UK. 'For example, in Bristol, although asylum seekers are not permitted to access higher education, the University has arranged for some people to improve themselves through education. Denial of an education is damaging to self esteem. Education would help people if they are eventually allowed to work, reducing the burden on tax payers.'

## The Political Situation

'In 2008, the MDC entered into a power sharing accord with ZANUPF. Mugabe agreed to this in order that sanctions be lifted from the ruling elite. The political effect at ground level has changed little, in fact it has become worse as people's expectations were raised and dashed. There is no freedom of association. Minister Bennet has been jailed. An MDC Chairman in southern Zimbabwe was arrested for degrading Robert Mugabe when he addressed a rally of supporters. There is no freedom of speech. Prime Minister Morgan Tsvangirai wanted to talk to the prisons and police but permission to do this was refused by a police commissioner. There is supposed to be a sharing of ministries. Six months after the agreement, the Home Affairs ministry was supposed to go from co-sharing between a ZANUPF and MDC minister to the MDC minister holding the office but the mechanism for this has still not been set up. The MDC are considering pulling out of the agreement.'

'International businesses have returned to

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Zimbabwe, of course they are interested in making profits in Zimbabwe. There is relative tranquillity in the country and there is now food in the shops. However, now that the people see that power sharing has led to an improvement, they are less likely to want the MDC to return to opposition and experience the conflict that existed prior to power sharing. So people would be more likely to vote for ZANUPF in order to avoid a return to the conditions that existed up to 2008. Access to food, hospitals with medical supplies and the creation of jobs have improved the general health of the population. This ended the cholera epidemic of 2008. Although there still are health problems, nineteen children died as a result of a measles outbreak. The BBC is now allowed to enter Zimbabwe which has meant that people here in the UK can see the reality of the situation there.'

#### **Why Seek Asylum in the UK?**

'As a former colony, there is a natural connection between Zimbabwe and the UK. Prior to the crisis, there was a Zimbabwean community here as people migrated to the UK to work as nurses in the NHS and students received scholarships to study at UK Universities. Zimbabwe's administrative systems are based on the UK model, with educational qualifications being recognised in the UK. When Zimbabweans began seeking asylum in the UK, the Home Office understood the situation in Zimbabwe and asylum seekers were more likely to be granted Refugee status. This empathy does not exist in countries such as in the Soviet Block. Russia has been a supporter of Mugabe and vetoed the imposition of sanctions on Zimbabwe's ruling elite.'

#### **Jail for Leeds Refugee**

##### **Who Used Forged Papers for Jobs**

The Yorkshire Evening Post reported on 25 January that an asylum seeker receiving asylum support benefits has been jailed for nine months for using forged documents to work illegally in order to support his family in Zimbabwe. Owen and Tau's response to this is that 'There is a financial consequence to seeking asylum. Not being allowed to work and surviving on £35 per week for years while waiting for a resolution to your claim for asylum is not possible. It is not only the individual who suffers but also your loved ones that depend on you. We do not condone or condemn him for claiming asylum support while working. Working illegally means you do not know if you will have a job to go to from one day to the next. If he had lost his work and had to make a new claim for Section 4 support, he would not have been able to explain how he had been supporting himself during this time and he would have been left without any form of income. Seeking asylum has financial consequences. Politicians are not looking at it from a human perspective. If it is a choice between breaking the law and doing what you have to do to survive, we would choose to do what we must in order to care for the people relying on us. As Father Tim Jones said, referring to a Zimbabwean woman who was caught working illegally in North

Yorkshire, received support from the local community and was given a suspended sentence and community service order, 'Some people have no choice other than to steal to survive.'

## **End Detention of Children and Families Now**

1,271 children were held in detention last year, with 232 detained for more than a month. Join the campaign at [www.outcrycampaign.org.uk](http://www.outcrycampaign.org.uk) to end the locking up of children in detention centres. Taken from their communities, with little understanding of what they have done to deserve being locked up, detention has a devastating impact on children. Scared and anxious, children have experienced insomnia, weight loss, bedwetting, depression and self harm while in detention.

There is no evidence that families run away from the authorities if they are not detained. Detention of children is a waste of taxpayers' money. It costs £130 every day to keep a child in immigration detention. To keep a family of four in detention for six weeks costs over £20,000.

Over 500 doctors have signed a Medical Justice petition calling for an end to immigration detention of children. Paediatricians and psychologists have testified to the mental and physical harm caused to children by detention. Separating them from their mother is worse and may cause insecurity, depression and anxiety which lasts throughout life.

On 15 May, new Immigration Minister Damian Green said the coalition government is committed to ending the detention of children for immigration purposes. He hopes that this will be agreed within the next few months and has launched a review of alternatives to detention. Now is the time to intensify the campaign to ensure child detention does end, families are released and allowed to stay together. Even the Home Office has admitted that families do not pose an absconding risk. Children's education and health needs, friendship ties and the desire to be settled in the UK prevent families disappearing from the authorities.

Last November's inspection report by Chief Prisons Inspector Dame Anne Owers on Yarl's Wood, concluded that decisions to detain children and families did not appear to be fully informed by considerations of the welfare of children, nor could their detention be said to be either exceptional or necessary. 68 children had been held in the centre for more than a month and one, a baby, had been held for 100 days.

Ex Immigration Minister Phil Woolas believes that the alternative to Yarl's Wood might include 'putting children into care and separating them from their parents, risking increased child trafficking and further illegal immigration'. Caroline Slocock of Refugee and Migrant Justice believes there are alternatives such as tough reporting requirements.

## Safety for People Fleeing War, Torture and Persecution

Before the General Election, the Refugee Council, Liberty and the Scottish Refugee Council called on candidates to remember the importance of providing safety to people fleeing war, torture and persecution in debates on asylum and immigration by signing an Asylum Election Pledge. 1,031 parliamentary candidates signed the pledge including Gordon Brown, David Cameron, Nick Clegg, SNP Leader Alex Salmond and Elfyn Llwyd of Plaid Cymru.

As a result there are now 219 MPs, including 20 based in Yorkshire and Humber, who could prove to be crucial allies over the next five years. This campaign has also highlighted the enormous support for asylum seekers and refugees in society. Thousands of people took the time to write to their parliamentary candidates, including the readers of this newsletter. The positive response of politicians has proven how effective it can be when people take collective action.

Another example of what can be achieved when asylum seekers, refugees and supporters take action is the new coalition government's decision to end the appalling practice of child detention. This is the result of years of campaigning by dedicated individuals and organisations and constitutes a significant victory.

However, it is essential that this commitment is fulfilled without delay, and in a way that keeps families together. While we celebrate the decision to end their detention, children remain incarcerated with their families and there has been no confirmation they will not be separated from their parents and put into care. It is therefore important that action is taken to let politicians know that this policy must be implemented swiftly and with the wellbeing of asylum seeking families at its heart.

The campaign to regain the right to work and the continued prevalence of destitution amongst refused asylum seekers in Leeds and the UK as a whole, constitute further challenges to be overcome during the next five years. The proposed reduction of the budget deficit means that it is more important than ever to ensure that asylum seekers and refugees are not seen as easy targets.

The Refugee Council will be working tirelessly to ensure that this is not the case. However, it is essential that we gain as much support as possible. By signing up to our campaigns newsletters and by joining our Facebook group we can keep you updated and hopefully involved in our campaigns actions.

Many Thanks, Lawrence Carter  
Regional Campaigns Officer, Refugee Council.

<http://www.refugeecouncil.org.uk/campaigning/takeaction>  
<http://www.facebook.com/refugeecouncil>

## No Mind Blowing Revelations

An Immigration debate panel was held on 3 March in Wakefield consisting of Phil Woolas, Jeremy Oppenheim (UKBA Regional Director for Yorkshire and Humberside) and Jonathan Sedgewick (Deputy Chief Executive of UKBA). Here are their responses to points raised by the audience:

### **The right to work for asylum seekers**

This is not possible under current policy and would be unfair to British taxpayers.

### **Destitution Among Asylum Seekers**

The panel rejected the accusation that people are forced to become destitute as a result of the asylum system. Failed asylum seekers have no right to live in the UK and should return to their countries of origin. Financial support is available under the Voluntary Assisted Return Programme. Section 4 support is available for people whose claims had failed. It is recognised by the UKBA that the decision making system needs to improve.

### **Restrictions on Section 4 Support**

Both the new card and the previous voucher systems are compliant with existing asylum and immigration legislation. Cash payments will not be offered because the law does not allow this.

### **Detention of Children**

This is under constant review. Phil Woolas acknowledged that the current practice is untenable. Jonathan Sedgewick was very open to ideas and recognised the damage detention can have on children. Detention of anyone is seen as a last resort. The panel want people to leave the UK in a dignified way. The asylum process works to prevent detention.

### **Immigration Advice Centres**

The panel agreed to look into claims that centres offering immigration advice in our region are under-funded and there are not enough of them.

### **Limited Leave or Indefinite Leave to Remain**

Generally, limited leave to remain is accorded to asylum claimants on the understanding that they will be returned to their country of origin if conditions improve, particularly in relation to issues of human rights. No answer was given as to what would happen to people whose leave to remain finishes this year.

### **What does the UKBA think of as success?**

The UK has had praise from the UNHCR for its asylum system, and the goal is to have a well managed migration policy, showing the public that a good service is being provided, the UK's borders are secure and the country is safe from harm. UKBA should work to counter what the British National Party are saying about migration into the UK. Jeremy Oppenheim stated that Leeds is the best asylum office in the UK.

There are plans for Jeremy Oppenheim to attend a meeting of Leeds Refugee Forum.

## Refugee Week 2010 in Leeds

Leeds Refugee Forum are hosting a range of events celebrating Refugee Week in Leeds this year. These begin on Sunday 13th June, including a variety of workshops and a football tournament.

The finale will be 'Together for Leeds' music, dance and food and celebrating cultural diversity in Leeds on Saturday 19th June, 4 to 9.30pm at The Bangladeshi Community Centre, Roundhay Road, Leeds LS8 5AN.

For more information please ring Leeds Refugee Forum on 0113 244 9600.

## New Section 4 Payment Arrangements

The Azure Payment Card for Asylum Seekers on Section 4 came into operation in our region in January 2010, replacing the voucher system. The card, administered by Sodexo, can be used in all the major supermarkets and Londis/Budgen, Costcutter, Co-op/Somerfield, Farm Foods, Peacocks, Wilkinsons, Boots and Mothercare.

The Azure card should be automatically topped up on Mondays. For single Asylum Seekers, at the end of the week on a Sunday, any remaining balance on the card is reduced to £5. Any unspent value above £5 is lost. Single people receive the equivalent of £35 per week. Section 4 claimants with dependant minors can claim additional payments for items such as children's clothing and they are allowed to carry over the remaining balance each week.

There have been occasions when people have attempted to use the Azure card at the checkout, only to find that Sodexo have failed to top it up with credit. They are then faced with the embarrassment and inconvenience of not being able to do their shopping until the error has been corrected. Another problem is that the card is insecure, if the card is stolen or lost, anyone can use it.

### The right to work of Asylum Seekers

On 16 March, Fabian Hamilton MP for North East Leeds submitted an Early Day Motion:

'That this House believes that asylum seekers looking for sanctuary in the UK should be granted the right to work from the day of arrival; further believes that this would afford such vulnerable people dignity as well as the ability to support themselves financially; and notes that this would also reduce the burden on the taxpayer'.

40 MP's have signed the motion.

## Leeds Asylum Seekers' Support Network

LASSN 233-237 Roundhay Road LEEDS LS8 4HS

Tel: 0113 380 5690 Fax: 0113 380 5691

Email: [admin@lassn.org.uk](mailto:admin@lassn.org.uk)

## LASSN Gets it 'Just Right'

This year is the Year of Volunteering in Leeds (see [www.leedsyearofvolunteering.co.uk/](http://www.leedsyearofvolunteering.co.uk/)). LASSN is one of the largest volunteering organisations in Leeds. Last year 235 people volunteered to work with LASSN, with most of them doing something every week.

We recently undertook a survey to see how well we supported our volunteers. Key results were:

- 84% of volunteers replying said the amount of support was 'just right'.
- The type of support most appreciated is the contact with LASSN staff.
- 91% of volunteers also said the amount of training is 'just right'. A couple of people wanted a bit more and someone wanted a bit less!
- 76% of volunteers read every issue of the newsletter and 67% read it from cover to cover.

"I love the fact that I can just call up Pauline or anyone in the office whenever I need any advice or help..."

"I value most the consistent support of staff on specific issues which arise."

Yet we still want more volunteers! We don't have enough volunteers for all the asylum seekers and refugees who need support. To volunteer at LASSN phone for an application form or download one from our website [www.lassn.org.uk](http://www.lassn.org.uk)

### Make friends with Befriending

Do you have life experience?

Do you have a couple of hours a week to spare, ideally during the day?

Do you want to build a relationship with someone from another culture?

For more information on Befriending ring Pauline on 0113 380 5687 or Cherry on 0113 380 5693

### Volunteer in your sleep with Short Stop

Do you enjoy welcoming people and helping them feel at home?

Could you provide an evening meal, bed and breakfast for asylum seekers and refugees in your own home one night a month?

For more information on Short Stop ring Katrina on 0113 380 5689

### Enjoy a good conversation with English at Home

Do you have a couple of hours a week to spare, ideally during the day?

Do you want to help someone learn English?

For more information ring Gerard on 0113 380 5692

