

Independent Asylum Commission

CONDUCTING A NATIONWIDE REVIEW OF THE UK ASYLUM SYSTEM

IN ASSOCIATION WITH THE **CITIZEN** ORGANISING FOUNDATION

PRESS RELEASE

02/02/07

CITIZENS' ENQUIRY EXPOSES "CYNICAL" AND "INHUMANE" ASYLUM DECISIONS BY HOME OFFICE

A national "citizens' enquiry" this week heard evidence of inhumane treatment of asylum seekers by a Home Office permeated by a culture of cynicism and unbelief.

On January 31st the Independent Asylum Commission held the first of seven regional public hearings and roadshows in St Anne's Roman Catholic Church, Birmingham, focusing on the asylum determination process and the impact of asylum seekers on the West Midlands. Commissioners Sir John Waite, Canon Nicholas Sagovsky, the Earl of Sandwich and the Countess of Mar heard testimony from a dozen local witnesses including asylum seekers, refugees, the police, local authority representatives, solicitors and those working with asylum seekers and refugees.

Local solicitor Margaret Finch testified that there was a deep cynicism at the heart of the Home Office asylum decision-making process that encouraged a culture of disbelief of asylum seekers' claims.

Ms Finch said:

"There is a lack of open-mindedness. Solicitors find themselves fighting a guerilla war with the government to ensure the basic human rights of asylum seekers are protected".

Mark Phillips, representing the Immigration Law Practitioners Association (ILPA), criticised the lack of access to legal aid for asylum seekers, and new proposals to reduce funding for legal representation for asylum cases still further.

Mark Phillips said:

“The government is reducing the legal aid budget and at the same time accusing legal aid lawyers of being on the gravy train. This is the only gravy train ever that people are rapidly jumping off – the number of law firms offering legal aid to asylum seekers has reduced by a third in just eighteen months – precisely because most firms provide legal aid to asylum seekers at a loss”.

Local refugees and asylum seekers told the Commissioners of the manifold problems they faced when claiming asylum, including: rude Home Office staff; corrupt interpreters; lost documents; poor country information; incorrect termination of financial support; and frequent transfer to different accommodation.

Cissy, a journalist from Gambia whose asylum claim was refused but is having his claim reconsidered in the light of new evidence, said:

“I was persecuted in my country for my journalism and it was not safe for me there. But claiming asylum in the UK was like jumping out of the frying pan and into the fire. Refugee status is no good to corpse – we need it while we are alive.”

Claudette, an asylum seeker from the Ivory Coast, broke down in tears as she recounted how the Home Office interpreter and an officer from the flagship New Asylum Model - piloted in the West Midlands – laughed at her during her asylum interview. Another witness, Tendai, a businesswoman from Zimbabwe, said that she felt that the decision about her asylum claim was made as soon as the interviewer looked at her. Ali, an asylum seeker from Iraq recalled how a member of Home Office staff tried to speed up an interview in order to get out to a Valentine’s Day meal with his wife.

Buzimungu, a refugee from Rwanda was finally granted refugee status after three years in limbo and two years in which his financial support was cut off. “I was moved eighteen times in that period – I lost contact with my solicitor and my GP, and my financial support was cut off just before my asylum interview.”

Earlier, Chief Inspector Paul Giannasi of Staffordshire Police called for greater emphasis to be put on promoting community cohesion and tackling misapprehensions about asylum seekers in predominantly white working class areas near to asylum dispersal zones.

David Barnes, Director of the West Midlands Strategic Partnership for Asylum and Refugee Support, a consortium of senior Home Office officials, local authorities and the private sector, criticised communication within the Home Office:

“Even Home Office officials would acknowledge that there needs to be a much more holistic approach, and that different teams should work together more effectively.”

On the issue of housing, Mr Barnes said:

“It is important for social cohesion that asylum seekers and refugees are not given better treatment than other parts of the community.”

Sir John Waite, Co-Chair of the Independent Asylum Commission, said:

“At this first hearing of the Commission, we heard some incredibly powerful testimonies that raise real concerns about the UK’s asylum system and raise real questions for the Home Office. And that is why our enquiry is so timely. But this is a fair and impartial Commission and this is just the start - we know that this is a difficult issue and we will be seeking a response from the Home Office which will also be used as evidence. We will be doing our utmost to listen to all sides before we publish our report and recommendations next year.”

For further details contact Jonathan Cox, IAC Co-ordinator: 07919 484066.

Notes for editors:

- Photographs of the 31st January West Midlands Hearing are available – contact jonathan.cox@cof.org.uk
- The Independent Asylum Commission is conducting a nationwide review of the UK asylum system.
- The IAC is independent of government and the voluntary sector, and is accountable to citizens.
- The Commission is keen to hear from any individual or organisation who is concerned about the asylum system – from those who believe it is too generous to those who believe it is not providing adequate protection for refugees. Information on how to submit evidence can be found at www.independentasylumcommission.org.uk.

For more information see www.independentasylumcommission.org.uk