

# Independent Asylum Commission

CONDUCTING A NATIONWIDE REVIEW OF THE UK ASYLUM SYSTEM

IN ASSOCIATION WITH THE **CITIZEN** ORGANISING FOUNDATION

**PRESS RELEASE**

**23/05/07**

## **“MAJOR FLAWS” IN TREATMENT OF VULNERABLE ASYLUM SEEKERS, CITIZENS’ ENQUIRY TOLD**

A national “citizens’ enquiry” into the UK asylum system this week heard evidence of major flaws in the way that vulnerable asylum seekers such as children, torture survivors and the disabled are treated in the UK.

On May 22<sup>nd</sup> the Independent Asylum Commission held its third public hearing and roadshow in the Welsh Institute of Sport in Cardiff. The hearing focused on the experiences of particularly vulnerable groups of asylum seekers, including children and young people, women, torture survivors, the disabled, and lesbian and gay refugees.

Three of the Commissioners chosen to lead the enquiry, including former High Court judge Sir John Waite, Canon Professor Nick Sagovsky of Westminster Abbey and international torture expert Professor Silvia Casale, heard testimony from twenty witnesses including the Welsh Refugee Council, Save the Children, Welsh Local Authorities Consortium for Refugees and Asylum Seekers and Refugee Voice Wales.

Local asylum seekers and refugees also gave evidence and talked from their own experiences about the problems they face having sought sanctuary in the UK from persecution abroad.

Riverside councillor and chair of the Welsh Local Authorities Consortium for Refugees and Asylum Seekers Gwenllian Lansdown criticized the media and politicians for conflating immigration with asylum and thus increasing support for the BNP in Wales.

Councillor Lansdown said:

“Integration is a two-way process. We should ask not just what refugees can do to integrate with our communities in Wales, but also ask what our communities in Wales can do to integrate with refugees.”

Aled Eirug, Chair of the Welsh Refugee Council, compared the situation in Wales favourably with that in England, pointing out that all the leaders of the main political parties had stuck to their pledge not to campaign negatively on asylum issues in the recent National Assembly elections.

Mr Eirug said:

“Although immigration and asylum are not devolved issues, the housing, health and welfare needs of asylum seekers in Wales are delivered by the Welsh Assembly or local authorities. The Home Office does not seem to understand the implications of devolution for service delivery in Wales.”

Dr Heaven Crawley, an expert in the welfare of asylum seeking children and a lecturer at the University of Wales, Swansea, condemned the attitude of Home Office officials who viewed separated children as economic migrants instead of as children needing protection. She also noted that the UK had a reservation to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child relating to immigration control.

Dr Crawley said:

“The UK Government says that *Every Child Matters* – but if you are a separated child or the child of asylum seekers the Government thinks you don’t matter, as immigration control is given greater importance than child welfare. And even when the policies are good, there is a massive gap between policy and practice.”

The Commissioners heard young asylum seekers living in Wales explain the negative impacts of the asylum system on their lives and the lives of their friends. One child was unable to represent Wales at sport as they were not allowed to leave the country. Another straight A student was deported on the day of their A Level exams. Few are able to go to university because they are forced to pay international rate tuition – which coupled with the restriction on the right to work effectively excludes them from pursuing their education.

A young asylum seeker from Iran revealed the stress and depression caused by the threat of deportation. He said:

“When one of your friends disappears it is very sad. But it also makes you think, will I be next? What is the point of studying if I am going to be deported any day now?”

Jose, a torture survivor from the Democratic Republic of Congo, praised the treatment he had received from charities in the UK:

“My family helped me flee the DRC after I was tortured. I came here and am very grateful for the support of charities like the Welsh Refugee Council and the Medical Foundation for the Care of Victims of Torture. I still have flashbacks when I see the army recruiting in Cardiff, but things are getting better.”

The Commissioners heard evidence of the significant difficulties faced by the disabled and those with health needs.

Lisa Power, Head of Policy and Campaigns at the Terence Higgins Trust said:

“It is a disgrace that refused asylum seekers are unable to access hospital care. It costs just £6,000 to pay for the medication to prevent the transfer of HIV from a pregnant woman to her baby, and half a million pounds to pay for support for someone with HIV for their whole life. Yet the Government is denying secondary healthcare to refused asylum seekers and babies are being born with HIV, entirely preventably.”

Romeo, a disabled asylum seeker living in Cardiff explained how the accommodation he had been given was not accessible, that he had not been given a wheelchair until after he had had an accident, and that the NHS refused to provide crutches when his wooden pair broke.

Romeo said:

“The lodging I was given had no ramp, and so I had to be lifted by my neighbours every time I went into my home. I made friends quickly back then – I had to in order to survive!”

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

“At this third hearing of the Commission, we got a unique insight into the trials and tribulations of the most vulnerable asylum seekers in the UK – many of which seem to be entirely avoidable. My fellow Commissioners and I heard evidence that raises real concerns about the UK’s asylum system that we will be following up with the authorities. 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 there are difficulties involved 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, and so I urge people on all sides of the debate to write to and email us with your views on this issue.”

Commission Co-ordinator, Jonathan Cox, said:

“The Commission received a warm welcome in Wales – as have many of the refugees and asylum seekers we heard from at the hearing. However there are clearly some major issues that need resolving and that we will bear in mind. I hope that the next administration in the National Assembly for Wales, not just the Home Office, will take note of our findings and their implications for Wales when we publish our report in 2008.”

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

**Notes for editors:**

- Photographs of the 22<sup>nd</sup> May Cardiff Hearing are available – contact [jonathan.cox@cof.org.uk](mailto: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 organization 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](http://www.independentasylumcommission.org.uk)