

Immigration and Asylum Debate- 12/4/2000

Key Messages

- **The refusal to allow retailers to provide change to asylum seekers under the Government's voucher system is unreasonable, unfair, and discriminates against these people at a time when they are most vulnerable.**
- **Relative to population, Britain receives fewer asylum seekers than the majority of our European neighbours. Rising numbers of applications reflect rising levels of conflict and need, rather than the nature of UK Government provision.**
- **There is an urgent need for a more balanced debate, and asylum seekers should receive the sensitive consideration they deserve. Failure to do so could damage race relations.**

Introduction

In addition to Oxfam's long-standing international work in relation to humanitarian protection, we have been developing our work with asylum-seekers and refugees in Britain since the setting up of the UK Poverty Programme in 1995. Oxfam is therefore well placed to comment on asylum issues in relation to the UK as well as internationally. This briefing highlights Oxfam's continuing concerns in relation to the 1999 Immigration and Asylum Act.

'No change' vouchers for asylum-seekers

On April 3, when the Government's new voucher scheme came into operation, Oxfam made public its decision not to participate unless its shops were able to give change to asylum seekers using vouchers. This position is now publicly supported by a range of UK charities, including Save the Children, Shelter, and Marie Curie Cancer Care.

Oxfam believes that refusing retailers permission to provide change when asylum seekers shop with them is unreasonable, unfair and discriminates against these people at a time when they are most vulnerable. With other charities, Oxfam is meeting with French multinational Sodexo (who are contracted to run the scheme for the Government) on Thursday 14th April to re-emphasize its concerns regarding the scheme. Oxfam has also written to the Home Secretary on the same subject.

Asylum seekers are among the poorest people in our country today. At present the vouchers amount to 70-80% of the basic income support offered to UK citizens, already well below subsistence level. The £10 cash element will be clearly insufficient to meet the additional needs of asylum seekers (eg. stamps, phone calls, transport costs).

Given that the Government is not committed to uprating the level of voucher support in line with income support, the relative impoverishment and exclusion of asylum seekers will worsen over time. This is especially likely as the Asylum Support Regulations specifically prevent charities, churches and individuals from topping up inadequate state provision - if they do so, government support will be reduced.

Throughout the passage of the Asylum Bill, Oxfam and many other organisations working in this field consistently made clear that ideally a cash-based system should be retained, and the Government has admitted that vouchers are more expensive to administer than cash. Oxfam continues to believe that supporting asylum seekers with vouchers rather than cash is humiliating and that the separate support system will be insufficient to meet basic human needs.

The root causes of UK asylum claims

In global terms it is primarily poor countries (eg. Iran, Pakistan, Tanzania), which bear the brunt of refugee movements. There are an estimated 8 million refugees in Africa (including 2 million from conflicts in Sudan, Somalia, Ethiopia and Eritrea), together with several million more displaced in their own countries.

Whilst it is undeniable that asylum applications to the UK have increased significantly over the past year, Oxfam is convinced that this trend reflects global factors rather than UK support provision for asylum seekers. Applications to many western European countries are rising because the levels of conflict and poverty worldwide are increasing. Relative to population, many other European countries, take far more asylum seekers than the UK does - Britain is 8th out of 13 (1.21 per thousand population), behind Luxembourg, Belgium, the Netherlands, Austria, Ireland, Sweden and Denmark.

The recent surge in UK figures - especially from the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia - is primarily due to increasing applications from countries where violence has been at a very high level over the past year. For example, in the Federal Republic (including Kosovo, Montenegro and Serbia), where Oxfam has been heavily involved in supporting refugees following the most serious conflict in Europe since World War II, the magnitude of the refugee crisis is hard to overstate. In addition to more than 200,000 people displaced by the Kosovo conflict, the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia contains around half a million refugees from earlier wars in Croatia and Bosnia. Return of refugees to their original homes remains extremely slow throughout the former Yugoslavia, due to continuing inter-ethnic and political tensions and economic hardship.

Against this background, it is essential that UK policy addresses serious human rights violations in countries of origin and encourages positive use of trade, aid, and development policies to improve living conditions in source countries - rather than just seeking to control migration (eg. by increasing use of airline liaison officers and visa regimes). Ultimately, 'absolute respect of the right to seek asylum' must be guaranteed, as set out in the Presidency conclusions from the Tampere European Council on Asylum (October '99).

The need for balanced debate

Oxfam is appalled at the current deluge of negative images of asylum seekers within local and national media coverage. Such portrayal not only creates a difficult and dangerous climate for asylum seekers; we believe it also damages race relations more generally in the UK. We urge politicians and the media to use their influence to promote a balanced debate and to give asylum issues the sensitive consideration they deserve, in line with the UK's international obligations to provide protection to those who have a well-founded fear of persecution. We have written to the Home Secretary to this effect.

In the Declaration on 'Principles of Good Practice for the Debate in relation to the Asylum Bill' in February 1999, the leaders of Parliamentary parties in England, Scotland and Wales undertook not to endorse or publish material, or to use words or actions, which might incite prejudice on the grounds of race, nationality or religion. At this time, it is especially important that these commitments are upheld.

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