

21 January 2003

Asylum and terrorism – the facts

The tragic events of last week have prompted a flurry of negative media coverage about asylum seekers. Amid the deluge of reporting of the terrorist risk to the UK, one key fact is being repeatedly overlooked - namely that the bulk of asylum seekers are not terrorists. Nor have they committed any kind of crime. They are simply men, women and children exercising their basic human right to flee persecution and find sanctuary elsewhere.

The figures speak for themselves. 88,300 peopleⁱ applied for asylum in the UK in 2001. Of the thirteen people currently being held following the police activity in London and Manchester last week, it is now being alleged that two entered the country via the asylum system – one of whom was already being sought by the security forces for deportation following the rejection of his application. A number of other people who were initially taken into custody, some of whom were purported to be asylum seekers, have subsequently been released without charge. It is also currently alleged that one of the seven people detained following the raid on the Finsbury Park mosque on Monday had applied for asylum. This makes a total of **three** asylum seekers reportedly held by police in connection with recent events. The association of asylum seekers en-masse with terrorism is wildly misleading and irresponsible, and is damaging the already precarious state of race relations in the UK.ⁱⁱ

We should also keep in mind that the number of people who enter the country and seek protection through the asylum system is minimal when considered in the context of the annual traffic across UK borders. During 2001, around 23 million individuals (including business people, tourists and studentsⁱⁱⁱ) came from abroad to stay for a limited period in the UK^{iv}. 108,825 people came to stay on work-permits, and 29,100 people came to the country to rejoin their husband or wife. In total, over 88 million passed through UK borders during the course of the year^v. It would be impossible to make our borders utterly impervious to criminals and terrorists – dangerous people who have the money and networks to get in to the UK without recourse to the asylum system. But it would be morally inexcusable to abandon our commitment to provide protection to those who need our help.

The right to protection is enshrined in international law in the 1951 United Nations Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees. Under the terms of the Convention, there should be no safe haven for terrorists, nor are they protected from criminal prosecution if they transgress against the laws of their host country. On the contrary, the Convention is carefully framed to exclude people who have committed particularly serious crimes, whilst ensuring sanctuary to those with a genuine need.

The statistics show that the majority of people who seek refuge in the UK have taken flight from regimes with well-documented and incontestable records of human rights abuses – from countries like Iraq, Zimbabwe, Somalia and Afghanistan. The UK has a strong tradition of giving people uprooted by war and injustice the chance to rebuild their lives – and over the years we have benefited enormously from the skills refugee communities have brought to our shores. We must not falter in our support for the world's most vulnerable now.

Fazil Kawani, Communications Director at the Refugee Council said:

For centuries, refugees have arrived and settled in the UK. Many of them have made huge contributions to this country, and most have lived peacefully alongside other communities. Very often these refugees have fled from human rights abuses committed in brutal states, or from the actions of terrorist groups. Events of the last two weeks should neither stop us providing protection to those who flee from persecution nor lead us to mistakenly criminalise the entire refugee population.

Whilst extending our sincerest sympathy to the family, friends, and colleagues of Detective Constable Stephen Oake, we would urge media and public to recognise that the overwhelming majority of asylum seekers do not engage in any criminal activity. The asylum system exists to ensure that the world's most vulnerable can find a safe haven from persecution. The rights and safety of the thousands of people in genuine need should not be compromised because of the activities of a criminal minority.

The Refugee Council

The Refugee Council is the largest charity in the UK working with asylum seekers and refugees. We provide practical help and work to protect refugee rights.

If you would like further information about our work, or issues associated with asylum in the UK, please contact info@refugeecouncil.org.uk or call 020 7820 3085.

If you would like to get involved in campaigning to protect the right to asylum, please e-mail us at: protectrefugees@refugeecouncil.org.uk.

To find out more about the misrepresentation of asylum seekers in the media, please read our Press Myths briefing at www.refugeecouncil.org.uk/news/myths/myth001.htm

SOURCES

ⁱ Includes dependants. For a summary of asylum statistics, visit <http://www.refugeecouncil.org.uk/infocentre/stats/stats007.htm>

ⁱⁱ As yet it's not completely clear how many people currently in custody are asylum seekers or refugees – Scotland Yard have not released any details. These figures are based upon recent news reports and have not been confirmed.

ⁱⁱⁱ Figure does not include asylum seekers or other migrants

^{iv} **International Passenger Survey 2002**, http://www.statistics.gov.uk/downloads/theme_transport/TTrends02.pdf

^v **Control of Immigration: Statistics United Kingdom, 2001** <http://www.homeoffice.gov.uk/rds/pdfs2/hosb1102.pdf>.

Includes people in transit, and travel by UK nationals.