

RCONews



Newsletter from the Community Development Team

No Place for A Child: Stop Detaining Children now!

“Detention is like a cage, and I was a small bird with no food in it. I wished I could fly....”

Navid, aged seven, spent 32 days in detention at Yarl's Wood Detention Centre

Save the Children UK, the Refugee Council, Bail for Immigration Detainees, the Scottish Refugee Council and the Welsh Refugee Council have joined forces to launch a public campaign entitled No Place for a Child: Stop Detaining Children now! The campaign was launched on 27th March 2006 and the initial phase will run until July 2006. We want your help to ensure that the UK government gets the message that detaining children for immigration purposes¹ is wrong and that it should pursue alternatives to detention. The campaign has a dedicated website: www.noplaceforachild.org.uk where individuals can lobby the Home Secretary and their Member of Parliament on this issue.



Young boy protests against the detention of asylum-seekers, Harmondsworth detention centre, 2001.

The issue

The UK government is locking up thousands of children, including babies and their families, in immigration detention centres across the UK. Save the Children's recent report² estimates that more than 2,000 children are detained each year having not committed any crime.

¹ Commonly used phrase which distinguishes between detaining children for immigration purposes and detaining children involved in criminal proceedings

² No place for a child, 2005 www.noplaceforachild.org/resources.htm

Children and their parents are not told how long they will be detained for. There is currently no statutory time limit on the length of time that anyone can be detained under immigration powers. For many of these families, the experience of detention is particularly traumatic because they have come to the UK to escape terror in their own country, often at the hands of state officials. For children, the effects of detention in the UK have been shown to be extremely damaging. Children feel they are being punished but do not understand why, often leaving them depressed and traumatised. Seven year-old Sophie was detained with her mother and five year-old brother. Her mother says, "She was crying all the time... and saying 'I'm going to kill myself.'"

Despite the fact that there are cheaper, viable alternatives to detention, the UK government has increased its use of immigration detention for children and families.

What your organisation can do

- Display the campaign postcard inserted in this newsletter
- Encourage colleagues, friends and family to visit the campaign website www.noplaceforachild.org
- Set up a link to www.noplaceforachild.org from your organisation's website
- Include the campaign postcard in any mailing you make before 30th June

Contact campaigns@refugeecouncil.org.uk for more postcards or call 020 7346 6702

Please save costs by using the campaign website rather than the postcards where possible.



STAR'S National Action Day - Age Matters!

On 23rd February 2006, students and young people took action for refugee children. Members of STAR (Student Action for Refugees) organised a number of fun and attention grabbing activities including sleep outs in the pouring rain, mock immigration desks, a trail of children's shoes and 'guess the age' games, all to raise awareness of some of the issues faced by young people who have sought asylum in the UK. Taking action on STAR's campaign, 'Age Matters!' students across the country sent off hundreds of letters to MPs, calling on the Government to replace the current flawed process of age determination facing unaccompanied asylum seeking children with an independent decision making body, that focuses more clearly on the needs of the child. The current process often assesses age based merely on a child's appearance.

In common with all of STAR's work, the Age Matters! campaign is youth-led and refugee-focused. The campaign grew out of concerns raised by STAR members, some of whom are refugees themselves.

STAR is a unique network of university-based student groups and youth members aged 16-25 that aims to raise awareness of refugee issues, campaign for refugee rights and to support refugees practically through local volunteering.

For more information on the campaign visit www.age-matters.blogspot.com or www.star-network.org.uk or call **Hannah Blythyn** on 020 7840 4443

Home Office launches new refugee integration website

A new Home Office website was launched on 7th February 2006 to provide information for people working with refugee children. The first section of the website to go live concentrates on educational issues and was developed collaboratively by the Home Office, the education sub-group of the National Refugee Integration Forum and the Department for Education and Skills. The website will provide a focal point for individuals working with refugees to share information and examples of best practice. Refugees will also find it valuable in identifying the range of support available to them. You can access the site directly at:

www.nrif.org.uk/Education/index.asp.

If you would like to comment on the content of the site and suggest how it might be improved, you can call **Nora McKenna** on 0207 346 1168 or email nora.mckenna@refugeecouncil.org.uk.

Volunteer Development Project

Off the Streets and into Work (OSW) is looking for organisations working with refugees and asylum seekers in Greenwich, Lewisham, Waltham Forest, Richmond or Enfield, whose service users might benefit from volunteering. Volunteering can help people gain work experience, get a reference, improve their English and meet new people. It is flexible, does not affect people's benefits, can be done by asylum seekers or refugees and involves a variety of different roles.

The OSW Volunteer Development Project can work with you to create links in your borough to help people to find volunteer roles that are right for them. They can also provide free training and resources for your staff to help them support people around volunteering. For more information, contact **Kate Bowgett** on 020 7089 2731 or email katebowgett@osw.org.uk.

UNHCR Quality Initiative reports

The UNHCR Quality Initiative reports are now available to read on the Home Office website (link below), following government agreement to put them in the public domain. The reports contain revealing information about the poor quality of the initial asylum decision-making process as well as

UNHCR's recommendations for improving decision-making. The Government's response to the UNHCR reports are also available on the web link below:

www.ind.homeoffice.gov.uk/ind/en/home/about_us/reports/united_nations__high.html



Sharing Experience

African Francophone Resource and Information Centre (AFRIC)

RCO News talks to Mr Gerard Mampo Guillet, Chair of AFRIC about its detainee befriending service.

AFRIC was established in 2004 to provide community support to French-speaking African migrants, refugees and asylum seekers in London and to develop a resource centre for these clients. However, our services are also available to all asylum seekers, refugees and migrants needing assistance.

We run a very well attended weekly drop-in advice and information service where we give impartial advice on issues including, immigration, education, training, employment, health and housing and refer clients to appropriate organisations and professionals according to their needs. We also organise cultural events and conferences. Last year we organised three public meetings with Keith Best, Chief Executive of the Immigration Advisory Service, to explain the implications of the new UK asylum, immigration and nationality legislation. In addition to the services previously mentioned, we also run a befriending service for people in detention, which is funded by the Home Office's Refugee Community Development Fund.

AFRIC opposes the policy of detaining asylum seekers; people claiming asylum are not criminals. Many have fled from death, persecution, torture and even wars. They are victims who need support and putting them in detention centres is not an effective

way to provide this. We think detention is unfair, inhumane and degrading. No asylum seeker should be detained. We think that regular reporting is a good alternative to detention and we oppose the tagging of asylum seekers. AFRIC strongly supports the *Stop Detaining Children Now!* campaign. Families with children or unaccompanied asylum seeking children should not be detained but instead, housed in the community to protect their physical and psychological wellbeing. Until detention is abolished in the UK, we believe that it is the Government's duty to fund detainee befriending services, to ensure detainees are given the support they desperately need.

AFRIC is staffed entirely by volunteers. Our ten volunteers are actively involved in the organisation's activities and services. Many of our volunteers are refugees or have refugee backgrounds, which makes it easier for them to relate to issues facing our target group.

Mr M O, a national from the Ivory Coast detained at Harmondsworth Removal Centre says, "I have a solicitor, who I believe is trying his best to help me, but the support of AFRIC is the most important to my morale. AFRIC is the one that keeps me going. Had AFRIC not supported me the way they did, I don't know what would have happened to me..."

For more information contact **Gerard Mampo Guillet or Faustin Maba** on 020 7635 1765/07958 366 105 or email afric3@hotmail.co.uk.



Funding news

Young People's Fund - England

Through the Young People's Fund, the Big Lottery Fund aims to support projects that will improve local communities and offer more opportunities to young people. The Big Lottery Fund is interested in projects where young people suggest ideas and are involved in making them happen. They particularly welcome the involvement of young people from disadvantaged backgrounds.

These projects should endeavour to help young people achieve the following: being healthy; staying

safe; enjoying and achieving; making a positive contribution and economic well-being.

The following grants are available for national or local projects under the Young People's Fund: grants to individual young people and grants to voluntary and community organisations.

For more information visit www.biglotteryfund.org.uk/programmes/ypf/index.htm or call 0845 410 20 30



Control Arms Campaign

It is estimated that around the world, half a million people are killed by armed violence every year and many refugees living in Britain will have had first hand experience of such violence. For some, this may have been the reason for fleeing their home countries and seeking sanctuary here.

It is for this reason that the Refugee Council is supporting the Control Arms Campaign, led by Oxfam, Amnesty International and IANSA (International Action Network on Small Arms.) A series of events are being planned at which we will be encouraging people to add their faces to the Million Faces Petition in support of an Arms Trade Treaty. You will find an insert inside this

copy of RCO news, which allows you to join the campaign.

In addition, we are hoping that RCOs will think of ways of getting involved with the campaign themselves. Oxfam are very keen that the unique perspective of refugees in the UK is clearly heard during the campaign. You or your organisation might want to think about taking part in events at a national level. Alternatively, you may want to organise a smaller event involving your own community. To get involved, contact **Penny Mclean** on 0207 346 1052 or email penny.mclean@refugeecouncil.org.uk

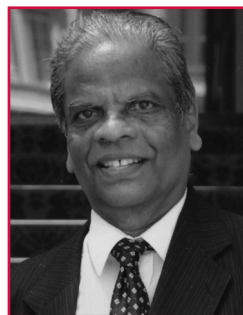
Financial Literacy Project update

The pilot training for the five Financial Literacy courses were successfully delivered in December 2005 in central London. The Refugee Council Community Development Team would like to rollout five new courses to different parts of London from April 2006 to February 2007. These will be: Individual, Employee/Self-employed, Business Awareness, Individual (Personal) Budget Preparation, Cash Flow Forecast Analysis, and Getting to Grips with Finance. The courses will be delivered four times during this period. The first rollout will start in April and May 2006 targeting Brent and its surrounding boroughs. Future rollouts will be determined at a later date and advertised accordingly.

The aim of the Financial Literacy Project is to support people with refugee backgrounds by reducing financial exclusion through enhancing integration, tackling poverty by developing basic financial skills and working with other partner organisations to develop and deliver suitable financial literacy and related courses.

For more information please contact **Girma Afley** on 0207 346 1161 or email girma.afley@refugeecouncil.org.uk

Obituary – Mr Saverimuthu Stanislaus MBE



Mr Stanislaus MBE, Chair of South London Tamil Welfare Group (SLTWG) passed away on 3rd February 2006 following long-term illness. He joined the SLTWG in 1990 and became Chairman of the organisation in 1994. He worked for many years to

serve the Tamil community and was involved in various activities that benefited minority communities in the UK, especially the Tamil Community. In recognition of his dedicated and honourable services to the refugee community, he was awarded an MBE in 2003.

Mr Stanislaus was a member of the Refugee Council's Board of Trustees from November 1996 until he retired in January 2005. He made a significant contribution, not only to the work of the Refugee Council, but many other refugee agencies. He was a much loved and respected individual who will be sorely missed by all who knew him and those who worked with him.

If you want to share your thoughts about asylum issues with other RCO News readers, email Penny Mclean at penny.mclean@refugeecouncil.org.uk