



Unsafe havens, unworkable solutions

Refugee Council position on the UK proposals
for transit processing centres for refugees
and regional management of asylum

Executive summary

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Unsafe Havens, Unworkable solutions sets out the Refugee Council's position on the UK government's proposals for the regional management of asylum through safe havens ('regional protection areas' (RPAs)) and 'transit processing centres' (TPCs).

The Home Office published its proposals on 27 March 2003. The document outlines a 'new' international approach to asylum processing and protection. Although it provides little detail, the core of the proposals is clearly the desire to process asylum claims abroad and reduce the number of asylum seekers arriving in the UK. It is proposed that these core objectives can be realised by improving protection in refugees' regions of origin and, in the shorter-term, by transferring asylum seekers from the UK to a place outside Europe where their claims would be processed.

Unsafe Havens, Unworkable Solutions sets out the Refugee Council's detailed response to the Government's proposals. The report welcomes the Government's recognition of the need to address root causes of forced displacement, the value of working with other states and international institutions, and its commitment to resettlement programmes. However, the Government's proposals fail to address the problems it has identified, are unworkable and will only serve to throw the system into chaos, further endangering the lives of people fleeing persecution. The report demonstrates that the Government's proposals are:

- **Unprincipled**

They attempt to circumvent the UK's international obligations by shifting responsibility for some of the world's most vulnerable people onto already over-stretched developing countries. This sends out a dangerous signal to other countries and threatens to unravel the global safety net provided by the 1951 Refugee Convention. Improving protection in the regions of origin must be additional to, and not in place of, existing legal obligations to those who arrive spontaneously.

- **Legally problematic**

The proposed RPAs and TPCs are unlikely to be able to provide the conditions and levels of protection required by international law, and the asylum process may not be subject to the same scrutiny and basic safeguards as in the UK. They will lead to a raft of expensive and lengthy judicial challenges in the UK and elsewhere.

- **Unworkable**

They will create 'super-Sangattes' which host countries are unlikely to willingly accept on their territory. Systems will become overwhelmed by the rapid growth in resident populations, numbers swelling as migrants are attracted from the surrounding region, asylum seekers are returned from the UK/EU for processing and targets for returns to countries of origin are missed. Experience shows that large-scale refugee camps, wherever they are located, simply do not work.

In addition to this, people seeking protection in the UK may be discouraged from claiming asylum, knowing that they will be deported to an overseas processing zone. They may remain 'underground', hindering their integration into society, fuelling social exclusion, depriving the Treasury of tax revenues and damaging community relations.

- **Expensive**

The cost of establishing TPCs, improving protection in regions of origin, and deporting tens of thousands of people to overseas processing centres and then back to Europe or their country of origin will be prohibitive.

The report highlights that the Refugee Council remains unconvinced of the need for major 'new' international approaches to overcome challenges to the global protection system. The problems identified by the Government stem from the inconsistent and mean-spirited application of the 1951 Refugee Convention. It should be noted that

- the world refugee population fell by 9% in 2001;
- the number of asylum seekers arriving in the EU fell by almost a half between 1992 and 2001, only rising slightly since then;
- the UK hosts less than 2% of the world's refugees; and
- the UK ranks only 32nd in the world in terms of its share of the refugee 'burden', in relation to its national population, surface area and wealth.

Real solutions to current challenges lie in greater co-operation within the EU, a real commitment to improving protection in the regions of origin, and far greater efforts to address the fundamental reasons why people are forced to flee their countries.

The report calls on the Government to

- adhere to the spirit as well as the letter of the Refugee Convention;
- invest resources in our domestic asylum system, primarily in better decision making;
- work with our European neighbours towards a common European asylum system consistent with international human rights standards; and
- restore public confidence in asylum policies and processes by providing leadership and ensuring that public statements reflect the realities of the asylum system and aim to cool, rather than inflame, the debate.