



LEWES ORGANISATION IN SUPPORT OF REFUGEES AND ASYLUM SEEKERS

www.losras.org

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Next Meeting: LOSRAS AGM

The AGM will take place on Wednesday 3rd October 2018 at 7.30

Friends Meeting House, Friars Walk, Lewes

All members welcome!

Mel Steel, the new Director of Brighton-based Voices in Exile, will talk about their developing work with asylum seekers and refugees and looking forward to collaborative work with LOSRAS.

Followed by the AGM business: review of reports from the chair, membership secretary and treasurer; approval of bank and auditor; and election of officers, committee members and trustees.

Nominations for election can be put in writing in advance of the AGM or orally at the meeting

An uncertain future for the Rohingya

Our May Open Meeting focussed on aspects of the Rohingya refugee situation. Jody Harris' introduction outlined their persecution in Arakan/Rakhine in Western Myanmar: harsh violation of human rights including denial of citizenship, attacks and massacre. The former arbitrary boundaries of British colonisation mean no recognised territory for the Rohingya: many are in Bangladesh, fewer in Myanmar and Thailand.

Kyle De Graw, of Save the Children International, and Jintana Malisueng, a former volunteer in Thai refugee camps, spoke most movingly of their work in the region. Jintana has advocated for refugees in Thailand, inevitably detained in captivity as it is not a signatory to the UN Refugee Convention. Conditions are particularly hard: no activities, little exercise and constant pervasive surveillance.

Kyle told us of NGO work in the decades-old UN refugee camps and the recently expanded unofficial camps of Cox's Bazaar, Bangladesh- the largest in the world, with no infrastructure to combat annual monsoon flooding. He described the August 2017 exodus of 700,000 Rohingya escaping escalation of violence in Myanmar, in which 6,700 had been killed in one month. Save the Children, first into the camps, found half the children seriously malnourished. They set up a food and nutrition programme, learning centres and essential women- and girl-friendly spaces.

"Rohingya women forced to go it alone", *The Guardian* article of 29.6.18, emphasises the need for these spaces. Traditionally forced to marry as young as twelve, many lost their husbands in the genocide. Men who escaped are now leaving their wives in rising numbers: for illegal work in Bangladesh, or for other women. Gender-based violence is increasing as a result of household stress: beating, rape (as a consequence many girls wear full burqa outside their huts), women harassed and attacked, forced to undertake exceptionally burdensome tasks to keep large families alive.

The British Rohingya Community (BRC) based in Bradford, represents fifty families who arrived ten years ago through the Gateway Programme. The BRC aims to raise awareness, encouraging government to put pressure on Myanmar. Restoration of citizenship rights is hoped for to create safe, equitable living conditions for those who long to go back to the place they regard as home. According to Parsa Sanjana Sajid, however, in the *New Internationalist*, April '18, "...the prospect of return is bleak". The partial liberalisation of Myanmar's political centre has not spread to the periphery which is still under military influence. The Rohingya are seen as "...interlopers, viewed (officially) through a lop-sided reading of history when the British settled people of Indian origin....(and) ignoring more than five centuries of Rohingya ancestral belonging and habitation in Arakan." Buddhists in the region justify killing Rohingya, who are largely Muslim, as a way of preserving the peaceful tenets of their religion. Although Myanmar has agreed with Bangladesh to the return of refugees it would be to a special camp with no guarantee to restore the rights the BRC and others insist upon. In fact much of Rakhine state is of great economic value globally, and mining opportunities mean clearing the land.

Sajid recommends campaigning to boycott foreign investors in the country; to document available evidence of ethnic cleansing; to support the refugees' rights as well as to provide aid. Above all she stresses that the Rohingyas' demand for justice by referring the Myanmar military to the International Criminal Court must be prioritised and honoured. For further information: www.britishrohingya.co.uk

Refugee Council and Oxfam Report on the impact of Family Separation on Refugees in the UK

Refugee families fleeing brutal wars or persecution often find themselves separated from their families just when they most crave their support. The separation can last for years or even indefinitely because of the UK's current restrictive rules on family reunion. A joint report from the Refugee Council and Oxfam "Safe but not Settled"(Jan 31 2018) is one of the first pieces of research to reveal how the impact of separation can badly affect refugees' ability to integrate into UK society.

The Research

The report is based on interviews conducted by the Refugee Council describing the experience of 44 resettled refugee families (mainly from Syria or the Horn of Africa) now living in Yorkshire, Humberside and Hertfordshire.

9 out of the 11 families who have now been reunited have found integration quicker and easier as a result. Teslay, a young Somali man who arrived in 2015, was severely depressed until his fiancée joined him. Then he found work, she started college and there was a considerable improvement both in their quality of life and move towards integration. However, for the majority of families, their lives are dominated by their desire for reunification with those they love.

The current UK restrictions

The UK only allows adults to apply to reunite with their partners or children under 18 who were part of their families before they fled. Grandparents, siblings and children over 18, however close their previous relationship, are not considered family. As a result 32 out of the 44 interviewed were not eligible for family reunion under present immigration rules. Some families cannot even attempt the legal process as it is unaffordable and, since 2013, it is really hard to access legal aid. Aster, who escaped prison in Eritrea has not seen her 3 children for 8 years. She constantly suffers despair and sadness. "When I think of my children I cannot enjoy life or take part in anything". She has no funds to travel and now her two older boys are over 18 they are not eligible for reunification and are likely to be conscripted

Summary of Findings

- * At least 15 of the families were not ready to settle.
- * 33 families were not able to focus on activities such as learning English, essential to facilitate integration
- * At least 18 of the families had suffered mental health problems exacerbated by separation.
- * At least 10 of the families were deeply concerned about another separated family member who is in a grave situation
- * 10 families had added overwhelming responsibility for care of their resettled family alone without the previous family support.
- * Refugees went to extreme lengths to attempt to see the separated family members, including incurring huge debts, making dangerous journeys and the use of smugglers.

Recommendations

The refugee Council and Oxfam consider the UK government has a responsibility to consider the welfare of refugees and to examine how its much vaunted desire to help them integrate is affected by family separation. It calls on the government to expand the criteria for who qualifies as a family member and to reintroduce legal aid for refugee family reunion cases.

This report may be particularly relevant for those LOSRAS members supporting Syrian families in the area.

Read the full report here: <https://policy-practice.oxfam.org.uk/publications/safe-but-not-settled-the-impact-of-family-separation-on-refugees-in-the-uk-620409>

Forthcoming LOSRAS events

- **Before the 30 September deadline, please sign and publicise our on-line petition** asking East Sussex to accommodate 10 unaccompanied children per year for 10 years, <https://democracy.eastsussex.gov.uk/mgEPetitionDisplay.aspx?ID=500000016&RPID=502067539&HPID=502067539>
- 1 September 10.00am – 1.00pm: Come and support our stall at the Societies Fair, Lewes Town Hall
- 14 – 23 September: A Mile in My Shoes – audio stories including refugees, produced by the Empathy Museum at the Attenborough Centre, Sussex University. For opening times and details, see <https://www.attenboroughcentre.com/events/2002/empathy-museum/>

Taking a stand: Deportation news

The UK forcibly deports over 12,000 people each year (in addition to around 20,000 ‘voluntary’ deportations under threat of enforced removal). Of this total, 18% are foreign nationals convicted of a crime in the UK; around 40% are EU nationals deported ‘for reasons of public policy or public security’ including rough sleeping and driving offences; and the remainder are a result of failed asylum cases and economic migration from outside the EU. Family members of an individual facing deportation are generally also liable to be deported unless they have qualified to live in the UK themselves.

A recent report by Corporate Watch (<https://corporatewatch.org/deportation-charter-flights-updated-report-2018/>) highlights that alongside returns on standard scheduled flights, the Home Office organizes mass-deportation charter flights to countries with high levels of deportation such as Albania, Pakistan, Nigeria and Ghana. Notable in the report is that there has been an increase in these flights to EU countries, both deporting EU citizens and returning asylum seekers to their first country of entry under the ‘Dublin agreement’. The European Commission is investigating whether the UK has been in breach of EU or human rights law after figures showed an increase in deportations of EU citizens since the Brexit vote.

Deportations regularly make the news, most recently when Swedish student activist Erin Ersson refused to sit down until a man being deported to Afghanistan was removed from her flight. Other direct action both stopping flights and bringing them to public attention included a 2017 ‘lock-on’ in which several activists chained themselves to a chartered plane about to leave Stanstead for a mass deportation. While deportations on both scheduled and charter flights continue, this adverse publicity and concern after the removal of Windrush generation migrants has led to Virgin Airways being the first British airline to stop accepting forced deportations. British Airways is now a target of activists, with the British Airways i360 Tower in Brighton occupied by protestors during Brighton Pride to highlight the airline’s continued deportation of refugees claiming asylum on the basis of their sexuality despite being a financial sponsor of Pride.

Where are we now? 2018 Refugee Council statistics

1. 26,547 asylum applications including dependants: an 8% decrease on year before.
2. At end of March ’18, 9,824+ asylum applicants waited longer than 6 months for initial decisions: 87% more than previous year in March.
3. Top 3 countries of origin of people applying for asylum in UK were: Iran, Pakistan and Iraq.
4. 32% of initial decisions were grants of protection (asylum or humanitarian protection). Subsequently 36% of asylum appeals were allowed, via the courts.
5. The government could use the Mandate scheme to allow refugees safe passage to join family members in the UK but only 31 were brought in between April ’17 – March ’18.
6. UASCS: 40% granted asylum – instead many are granted only 2 1/2 years leave to remain. Top country of origin is Afghanistan, then Eritrea.
7. 58 children were locked up in immigration detention despite a government promise in 2010 to end the practice.
8. 27,429 people were imprisoned in immigration detention centres, many seeking asylum, of whom over half were released, rendering their detention pointless.

The UN’s Refugee Agency estimates that nearly nine in ten of the world’s refugees are sheltered by developing countries. For example, last year Uganda welcomed 489,000 South Sudanese Refugees. For further information: www.refugeecouncil.org.uk/stats

Refugee week 2018

At our Refugee Week open meeting, Dr Jo Shawcross spoke movingly about her work with Freedom from Torture, and about the impact of torture and the subsequent traumas of travel and arrival in the UK. Belinda Kirby read a short story, ‘What goes around comes around!’ written by a survivor of torture who has been supported by LOSRAS and is now a successful student.

The stall on Cliffe Precinct this year was well-supported with over 150 signatures to the LOSRAS petition (see events section) and the unexpected added bonus of the Angels with Attitude choir singing and collecting for LOSRAS - thank you Angels!

Refugee Tales and the call to end indefinite immigration detention: This year and next!

This summer several LOSRAS members took part in the 4th annual Refugee Tales Walk from St Albans to Westminster, culminating in the finale at the British Library. As always it was an extraordinary event with great walks and talks, as well as the evening readings. *The Guardian* deputy editor, Claire Armistead, joined the walk towards the end and has produced a podcast which captures well the quality of this moving act of solidarity with immigration detainees, available on <https://www.theguardian.com/books/audio/2018/jul/31/refugees-in-their-own-words-books-podcast> and well worth listening to.

Excitingly next year's walk will begin in Brighton and end in Hastings with the first evening of readings and music taking place here in Lewes on 6 July 2019 and in Alfriston on the following night.

Refugee Tales, along with other members of the Detention Forum umbrella organisation, has been meeting MPs; and a significant number, including some in Government, agree that unlimited detention is inhumane and runs counter to the rule of law. With an Immigration Bill expected this autumn we have been cautiously optimistic that there may be enough support for the introduction of a 28-day time limit to win an amendment vote.

There also has been, and is, considerable parliamentary activity. Stephen Shaw, former prison ombudsman, has just published his second review of the 'Welfare in Detention of Vulnerable Persons'. He reviews progress and the lack of it since his first report to parliament 2 years ago, making 44 recommendations in the new 266-page report. Shaw focuses particularly on the lack of real progress on preventing the detention of particularly vulnerable groups and individuals (torture victims, pregnant women, older people and those suffering mental illness), and many of his recommendations deal with aspects of vulnerability. He welcomes the development of alternatives to detention pilots, but is highly critical of the lack of overall strategy, commenting on the fact that over half of the 26,541 people detained indefinitely last year were subsequently released back into the community, figures that "call into question the extent to which the current use of detention is cost effective or necessary".

There has been some cynicism about the government's timing – the report was laid before parliament on the last day before the summer recess. It is also regrettable that Shaw was not invited to consider the introduction of a time limit, which he explains in his forward, unhelpfully describing the call for a 28-day time limit as "more a slogan than a fully developed policy". As the cross-party inquiry into immigration detention in 2015 put it, "little will change by tinkering with the pastoral care or improving the facilities". Nonetheless Savid Javid, responding for the government, did commit to conducting a review of immigration detention time limits looking at other European models.

The scrutiny of the arbitrary use of immigration detention continues with on-going inquiries by both the Home Affairs Committee and the Joint Committee on Human Rights, so hopefully this appalling practice won't be allowed to disappear into the parliamentary long grass.

LOSRAS website: A new and revamped resource

Now we are a registered charity, we thought it about time to drag ourselves into the 21st century and get ourselves a web presence! With stunning design courtesy of Michael Munday Design and Illustration (www.michaelmunday.com) and expert website creation and hosting from James Pearman at Wired Monkeys (www.wiredmonkeys.com) we now have a wonderful site at www.losras.org with information on the refugee crisis and the asylum process; local action; and how to get involved and donate. Do take a look and share with friends who might want to get involved in our various activities.

Collections:

Gatwick Detainees Welfare Group: collections at All Saints Centre, Friars Walk, Lewes, open Mon - Sat 9-11 am. Ring 01273 486391 for other times (if door shut, try office on the right side of the building). Gatwick Detainees Welfare Group needs: for men only, in good quality : trainers/ shoes - sizes 8,9,10; jogging bottoms, jeans, hoodies; warm jackets/ coats, hats, scarves, gloves; new boxers and socks. Please bring items in a carrier bag and put in black 'LOSRAS' box inside entrance. Contact Val and Arnold Simanowitz on 01273 480011 with any queries.

LOSRAS aims to promote the welfare of refugees & asylum seekers in and beyond the Lewes District by:

- raising awareness of issues relating to refugees and asylum seekers
- providing practical help and responding to local issues as they arise
- advocating and lobbying to improve the rights of refugees and asylum seekers

Committee:

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Members: Jane Andrew, Jody Harris, Belinda Kirby, Jane McIntosh, Annie Ralph, Gill Tipping