

LEWES ORGANISATION IN SUPPORT OF REFUGEES & ASYLUM SEEKERS

www.losras.org

May 2024

LOSRRAS celebrates Refugee Week with an evening of Iranian music and food.

Saturday, June 8th from 7-9 pm.

Ramin Imantalab and his four-piece band, **Delband**, who are coming from London, will play their wonderful Iranian fusion music to which audience participation is welcome! There will be Persian buffet food provided courtesy of **Gandom** restaurant, Hove, and refreshments. All are welcome!

Please RSVP if you would like to come: belinda.kirbyte@gmail.com

The venue is Friends Meeting House, Friars Walk, Lewes, BN7 2LE.

Rwanda update: Following Sunak through the looking glass

LOSRRAS members will be all too aware of the shameful passing of the Rwanda legislation last month. What follows is an attempt to summarise where we have got to and what scope there still is for action. Trying to understand the implications and the shenanigans of Government is akin to being a fly on the wall at the Mad Hatter's tea party.

In summary, first The Nationality and Borders Act 2022 made it an offence to 'arrive illegally', despite the absence of any functioning legal routes for people seeking sanctuary. Then the Illegal Migration Act 2023 declared that everyone arriving without prior authorisation would have their claim for asylum declared inadmissible and would be removed to their home country or a 'safe' third country, including Rwanda, despite international refugee law.

Unsurprisingly, given Rwanda's track record in this area, the first attempt to forcibly remove people there was challenged. The European Court of Human Rights took the unusual step of granting an injunction to prevent anyone being removed until the UK Supreme Court had passed judgment. The Supreme Court judges found unanimously that asylum seekers transferred to Rwanda faced a real risk of being refouled (illegally returned to their country of origin). The court made several findings of fact, based on all the evidence, in order to reach that legal decision. In any sane democracy that should have put paid to the whole sorry story.

Instead, Sunak immediately announced that they would unilaterally change the facts by revising the treaty agreement between both countries and that he would introduce emergency legislation to 'allow parliament to confirm that ... Rwanda is safe'. Commentators pointed out that it could not, or at least should not, be done. It overrode our form of constitutional

democracy by undermining the important role of the independent judiciary. This role is to investigate evidence in order to scrutinise the acts of the executive, including Cabinet Ministers, and to prevent any illegal abuse of power. It eroded the role of the court as an independent arbiter of factual evidence, especially in deciding whether or not a particular course of conduct amounts to a breach of human rights law.

Nevertheless, that is exactly what has happened. Extraordinarily, The Safety of Rwanda (Asylum & Immigration) Act 2024 requires *Rwanda* to comply with international law (difficult to see how that is to be enforced), while prohibiting *our* legal system from applying significant swathes of national and international human rights law. If the European Court imposes an injunction to prevent a removal to Rwanda it will be for a Minister of the Crown alone to decide whether or not the UK will comply with the order of the European Court. Crucially it places a duty on every decision maker in the UK (including all the judiciary) to treat Rwanda as safe, whatever the evidence to the contrary.

What happens next?

The LOSRAS prison group is part of AVID, the umbrella group representing visitors of immigration detainees, who are monitoring what is happening on the ground. Currently AVID is aware of over 100 people who have been detained and served with a 'notice of intention (to be sent to Rwanda)' including 79 locally in Brooke House (Crawley). These include a range of nationalities - Afghanistan, Syria, Sudan, Iran, Turkey and Eritrea.

Visitors report significant increased mental health concerns, for instance a self-harming incident at Brooke House badly affected other detainees. Syrians have gone on hunger strikes. Detainees have only seven days from receiving their notice of intention to respond. Given that the only scope for challenge is for an individual to show that s/he 'would face a real, imminent and foreseeable risk of serious and irreversible harm' and that the evidence cannot be based on any general proposition that Rwanda is unsafe for asylum seekers, seven days is an impossibly short time when there is already a legal aid desert in immigration law.

Despite the legal constraints, there is a fightback. The guidance under the Rwanda Act has been published and there are now three challenges to that underway. One, brought by the civil service union, FDA, and two by NGOs (Asylum Aid and Human for Rights Network). These cases are helpfully summarised in coverage on Rwanda by Right to Remain, see: <https://righttoremain.org.uk/what-we-know-about-the-rwanda-act-and-treaty-so-far/>

As members will have seen in the news, there are also direct actions taken against detention and removal. We will keep members informed of any local action.

It is encouraging that Starmer has not followed Sunak through the looking glass to Rwanda. Unfortunately, the opposition's emphasis on the establishment of a Border Security Demand to fight traffickers more effectively tells us nothing about how the UK should in future fulfil its responsibility

towards people fleeing conflict, and fails to mention legal routes at all, only a very general commitment to improving efficiency, but to what end?

What can we do?

LOSRRAS has signed up to the 'Fair Begins Here' campaign which is being driven by the 'Together With Refugees' umbrella coalition. In the run up to the election, we will be asking the membership, and other members of the Lewes community, to write to prospective MPs to reiterate our rejection of the Rwanda plan and to spell out the alternative action we want a new Government to commit to - that being a policy on asylum that:

- **Ensures protection** for people fleeing war and persecution by upholding the UK's commitment under international law to the right to claim asylum and by scrapping the Rwanda scheme.
- **Provides a proper strategy for welcoming refugees**, who do so much to enrich our society, by ensuring fair, rapid decisions on their application for asylum, and the chance to rebuild their lives through settling in a community.
- **Forges stronger global cooperation** to tackle the root causes that force people to flee their homes and provides positive solutions when they do, including through safe routes to refugee protection.

Today, May 23rd, Sunak stated that there will be no Rwanda flights prior to the July 4th election. There is hope then, that this brutal policy may not - in the end - be enforced.

LOSRRAS Open Meeting

On May 2nd, Dr. Susie Ballentyne presented her doctoral research on identity, forced migration and wellbeing. Susie carried out her research with Syrian refugees in Brazil and with Ukrainian guests in the UK. She talked about how identity – 'the lens through which we perceive the world and our life' – can be severed and lost by forced migration. The big challenge for refugees, she said, is that they experience both a loss of identity and often an incompatibility between former identities and the new identities they are trying to develop. It was made clear post-migration stress can be as profound as that of conflict and war - and is overlooked in relation to psychological and social health.

Susie also spoke about how the language of asylum within the UK government dehumanises people, preventing them from being able to construct, recover or discover a new social identity. However, if opportunities for resilience are supported and scaffolded, then new social identities can grow, and wellbeing flourish. Susie advocated the following:

- Recognise that transition is not a one-off event but a process.
- Provide solidarity – spaces to recover and discover new identity
- Understand compassion as action
- Provide space to allow people to renegotiate their identities
- Challenge the language around forced migration
- Support opportunities for language development

For more information about Susie's published articles, email info@losrras.org



A lovely photo of the **Walk With Us** event on April 20th organised by LOSRAS members for Refugee Tales. Some 45 people joined the seven-mile circular walk enjoying sunshine, flapjacks and good company!

The annual plant sale!

Our annual fund-raising plant sale will be on **Saturday, June 1st at the Linklater Pavilion, Lewes, from 10-12 noon.** If you have plants you are happy to donate, do please drop them at 28 Prince Edward's Road, Lewes BN7 1BE in the preceding week as this will help streamline activity on the day (and labelled plants are much appreciated!) Please phone Belinda on 07514 808934 to arrange delivery. We are accepting cash and card payments. Please email: belinda.kirbyte@gmail.com

Resettle Sussex donation

We are grateful for a very generous donation from Resettle Sussex. Resettle was set up with the aim of sponsoring a refugee family but decided to amalgamate their fundraising success with a likeminded local organisation and so we are delighted to be able to continue the joint aim of supporting local refugee families.

Tom Walker: a tribute

Tom Walker, pastel artist, lived and worked in Lewes and Cooksbridge for forty years, and was, with his wife Anita, a staunch supporter of LOSRAS. He died suddenly on the 21st February in Ashburton, Devon, where they'd moved a few years before to be near their son and grandchildren. We want to stress how much we appreciate what he did for refugees, both in his understanding of the many difficulties they face and in his effective practical support. We will never forget his Star Gallery exhibitions, one of which included his 'Freedom of Movement' series, and the substantial donations he gave to LOSRAS as a result which reflected his deep commitment to humanity. The Syrian families that came to the District also benefitted from his thoughtfulness: ranging from explanations on day trips to the Castle on the Lewes tapestry he'd designed, to the strong support he gave the family befriended by Anita, his wife; Tom particularly providing the intriguing environment the children used to love. Mixing with his grandchildren he helped them to feel accepted, safe and at home. He is considered a really good man. The loss of him is immense.

Membership renewal 2023-24

Many of you have renewed your membership of LOSRAS, for which we are very grateful. However, if you haven't yet done so and would like to, please contact Belinda at belinda.kirbyte@gmail.com for information.

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

Co-chairs: Alison Bell & Gill Tipping

Treasurer: Tony Sims

Membership Secretary: Belinda Kirby
01273 474935 belinda.kirbyte@gmail.com

Committee Members: Annie Ralph, Marta Paluch, Helen Winters & Teresa O'Brien.