

AGENDA FOR COOKHAM FM RADIO BROADCAST

Introduction

Amnesty International's Cookham & Maidenhead group secured a slot on Cookham FM and has decided to use the slot to raise awareness of Refugee Week (19-25 June 2006) and to discuss issues relating to refugees.

Amnesty is an international organisation that works to improve human rights. Its purpose is to protect individuals wherever justice, fairness, freedom and truth are denied. It therefore has a particular interest in Refugee Week in order to promote understanding about the reasons why people seek sanctuary, and raise awareness of the way in which refugees are treated when they do seek sanctuary.

Amnesty works in countries where there are serious human rights abuses that lead people to leave their homes and seek asylum or refuge elsewhere. The mass displacement of people in the Darfur region of Sudan is one example which has hit the headlines recently. However, human rights abuses around the world continue to go unreported and receive little media attention. Last year 25,720 people applied for asylum in the UK according to Home Office statistics. The highest number of applications come from citizens of Iran, Somalia, Eritrea, China and Afghanistan, which all have records of serious human rights abuse.

Despite the need for people to receive help, the UN refugee agency has said that asylum applications to the industrialised world have halved since 2001. The UN High Commissioner on refugees says industrialised countries should focus on refugee protection, not cutting numbers. However refugees continue to encounter numerous problems upon arrival in their chosen destination, including poor or no legal assistance, poor living conditions (or detention in special centres), difficulties finding employment, discrimination and false representation in the media.

Refugee week is a chance to raise awareness as to why people seek refuge, and also to raise awareness of the contribution that refugees make to the UK, culturally and economically. It is a chance to deliver positive educational messages that counter fear, ignorance and the negative stereotyping of refugees. Refugee Week was first held in 1998, and was created in response to the increasingly negative perceptions of refugees and asylum seekers held by the general public in Britain. It remains the only UK-wide event that promotes the importance of sanctuary and the benefits it can bring to both refugees and host communities. In 2005, there were over 450 events, ranging from music festivals and art exhibitions to political debates, film screenings and community events.

Amnesty Cookham & Maidenhead has therefore invited a representative from the Refugee Council, based in London and a representative from a local charity, Slough Refugee Support, to discuss these issues. Tim Finch is the Director of Communications at the Refugee Council and Linda Chanan works for Slough Refugee Support.

The Refugee Council

(Tim Finch may like to discuss the work of the Refugee Council/any areas in which he has expertise)

Slough Refugee Support

(Linda Chanan may wish to discuss what Slough Refugee Support do/any areas in which she has expertise/case studies of refugees in the area)

Particular topics for discussion

1. What is a refugee?

The 1951 Convention relating to the status of refugees defined a refugee as someone who is forced to leave their country and seeks protection in another country because of "a well founded fear of persecution in their own country for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion."

The agreement was drafted in response to the Holocaust and was signed by 134 countries who agreed that anyone anywhere who is forced to leave their country because of persecution will have the right to have their claim to asylum heard fairly and receive protection if they need it.

People who flee their country are known as asylum seekers until they are granted refugee status.

2. A history of refugees in the UK

- Dutch/Jewish/Huguenots/French Revolutions/Belgian/Basque/Polish/Hungarians/Ugandans/Chileans/Bosnians/Kosovans. See www.refugeeweek.org.uk, "info centre" section for more details.
- the UK hosts less than 2% of the world's refugees.

3. A celebration of the contribution that refugees have made to the UK

- a Home Office study has shown that people born outside of the UK (including asylum seekers and refugees) contribute significantly to the economy, with estimates stating that they pay 10% more to the treasury than they take out.
- a survey in 2001 of more than 200 refugees in the UK found that over half had completed a first degree or higher, half spoke and wrote in two or more languages.
- the Council for Assisting Refugee Academics states that 18 refugees have become Nobel Laureates and 16 have received knighthoods.
- more than 1000 medically qualified refugees are on the BMA's database. Nayeem Azim, a refugee doctor, is responsible for founding the North Central London College, which trains overseas doctors.
- around 150 asylum seekers or refugees are on the British Dental Association Database.
- more than 250 asylum seekers or refugees are on the Royal College of Nursing database.
- more than 750 refugee teachers are registered with London based teaching agencies and over 1500 refugee teachers in the UK.
- Marks & Spencer, Burton, Tilda Rice, Thorn EMI, Saatchi & Saatchi, Patak Foods were all founded by refugees or their children.
- the winner of the 2005 Young Business Person in London was Peter Paduh, a refugee from the Balkans who set up Maxitech, a computer-recycling firm.
- One of the Orange Prize contenders for 2006 was a refugee from the Ukraine, Marina Lewycka, for her book "a short history of tractors in Ukrainian".
- Famous refugees include Sigmund Freud, Karl Marx, Camille Pissaro, Michael Marks (founder of Marks & Spencer), Alan Yentob, Joseph Conrad.
- PM Tony Blair: "Our country has benefited hugely throughout its history from the contributions of those who have fled here to escape persecution. Like those from all continents to whom Britain has been a safe haven before since, they have repaid our hospitality by enriching our culture, our society and country."

4. Treatment upon arrival in the UK

- Living conditions

Under section 4 Nationality Immigration and Asylum Act 2002, failed asylum seekers have state support withdrawn unless they agree to return home voluntarily. In 2005, the UK government decided that refugees will only be granted limited leave, initially for 5 years. If after 5 years, the situation in their country of origin is deemed to be safe, they will be removed. Agencies working with refugees fear

that this is being used as a another method to coerce refugees into returning to unsafe countries.

A report released by Amnesty in February 2004 (“Get it Right” - available on the Amnesty website) reveals Home Office asylum decisions are based on inaccurate and out-of-date country information, unreasoned decisions about people's credibility and a failure to properly consider complex torture cases. Government figures show that the Home Office got the initial decision wrong on nearly 14,000 asylum cases in 2002, meaning around one in five cases are overturned after costly appeals.

Many choose to “go underground” rather than risk returning to unsafe countries.

- Detention centres

Article 9 Universal Declaration of Human Rights states that “no-one shall be subject to arbitrary arrest detention or exile.”

According to UNHCR, the UK detains more people for longer periods and with less judicial supervision than any comparable country in Europe. Amnesty believes that the figure for asylum seekers detained under the Immigration Act in 2004 was over 25,000. Over 2,000 of those are believed to have been children.

The Refugee Council has joined with Save the Children and other organisations to launch a campaign which aims to stop innocent children being detained.

In a report published in June 2005 Amnesty International challenges the government to reveal how many people who have sought asylum are detained each year and for how long. The Detention Report 2005 is available on Amnesty's website.

- the media

In October 2003, the Press Complaints Commission issued a guidance note to editors warning that “inaccurate, misleading or distorted reporting may generate an atmosphere of fear and hostility that is not borne out by the facts” and could be in breach of Clause 1 of the Industry Code of Practice.

The Refugee Council has received rising numbers of reports of asylum seekers being harassed and attacked. Despite this, the media continue to portray refugees in a bad light e.g. the Daily Sport's report of “kicking out foreign scum”.

Find out more

- Refugee Week has its own website: www.refugeeweek.org.uk
- The Refugee Council www.refugeecouncil.org.uk
- Slough Refugee Support www.sloughrefugeesupport.org.uk
- Amnesty: www.amnesty.org.uk
- United Nations Refugee Agency: www.unhcr.org.uk