

RAM BULLETIN

Refugees, Asylum-seekers and the Media Project

Promoting best practice in media representation of refugee and asylum issues

advice
information
research
& training
on media ethics



No 37, February 2004

NINETEEN MORE DEAD

What a pity it has taken the tragic loss of 19 young Chinese people, overcome by the tide in Morecambe Bay, to focus media attention on the exploitation of those forced to live on the underside of life in the UK because of their legal status.

Perhaps the most appropriate response is to recall the message of songwriter Joe Hill before he was executed in Salt Lake City after a show trial in 1915. A Swedish immigrant to the US, he campaigned about the appalling conditions faced by migrant workers, and told his friends:

'Don't mourn - organise.'

Forward with RAM

Zimbabwean exile Forward

Maisokwadzo takes over as the new RAM Communications Officer in March. He will be developing the Exiled Journalists Network and assisting Terry Williams with regional networks and training.

Stink on the news stands spreads to other papers

PressWise (now known as MediaWise) has been approached for advice by media and Roma groups in Europe, following a classic scare story now running in the UK press.

Under the heading 'Stink on the news stand', the last *RAM Bulletin* highlighted offensive coverage about Roma by the *Daily Mail's* Ross Benson. In January *The Sunday Times* took up the theme, suggesting that up to 100,000 'Gypsies' could arrive in the UK when ten new states join the European Union in May. It noted that 1.7m Roma live in Hungary, Slovakia and Poland alone.

Next day *The Sun* 'revealed' the same story in a front page 'special investigation': "After three months in the UK [Roma] will be entitled to health, education, pension and welfare benefits". Then the *Daily Express* inflated the figure to 1.6m. "Gypsies

prepare to invade Britain" its headline crowed. Two days later it had revised its figure to 40,000 but was still predicting "economic disaster".

Most of the figures quoted by the press came from a MigrationWatch report in July 2003. Independent research commissioned by the Home Office, in 2003 estimated that 5,000-13,000 migrant workers might come to Britain after EU enlargement. The report concluded: "Net immigration will be relatively small".

The European Roma Information Office issued a detailed statement condemning the coverage. It said: "It is high time to decide whether the new Europe will be based on respect, tolerance, and equal opportunities for all its citizens regardless of their social, cultural or ethnic origin. Or, whether Roma will remain at the bottom of the social ladder and continue to be excluded from the same rights that which are naturally granted to the others."

For further information see www.homeoffice.gov.uk/rds/pdfs2/rds01r2503.pdf and <http://www.erionet.org/>

Express staff call in PCC over anti-Roma articles

Journalists at the *Daily Express* feel they are being pressured into writing anti-Roma articles. They have called on the Press Complaints Commission to intervene.

Some 70 staff agreed the following motion at a special NUJ meeting at the end of January: "This chapel (workplace branch) is concerned that *Express* journalists are coming under pressure to write anti-gypsy articles. We call for a letter to be sent to the PCC reminding it of the need to protect journalists who are unwilling to write racist articles, which are contrary to the NUJ's code of conduct."

The paper's new editor, Peter Hill, was appointed to the PCC in September 2003.

NUJ General Secretary Jeremy Dear said: "This is a fantastic action - for

EDITORIAL

What will the *Express* accuse us of next?

It's not surprising that journalists at the *Express* have taken the highly-unusual step of complaining to the Press Complaints Commission about their paper's editorial line on asylum seekers and refugees.

Negative coverage of the issue reached fever-pitch at the end of January, with the *Mail* and *Express* notching up five hysterical front page splashes between them in just six days.

On 26 Jan, the *Express'* front page carried the headline: "Asylum: New Visa Scandal". It reported how police had smashed an elaborate people-smuggling racket, involving a Dover-based Immigration Officer. She had allegedly been using an Immigration Service stamp to fraudulently mark 'indefinite leave to remain' on passports.

The story is clearly about fraud and people gaining illegal entry into the UK. Nevertheless, the paper linked it to the asylum process. Anyone with even the most basic knowledge of immigration law will know that such activity is classed as illegal entrance and has nothing to do with seeking asylum.

It's hard to escape the conclusion that newspaper bosses are trying to blame asylum seekers for absolutely everything that goes wrong in the UK – from visa fraud to missing donkeys and shortages in the Health Service.

It is time for papers to stop scapegoating asylum seekers and refugees. The *Express* journalists should be applauded for taking a stance because they have both truth and justice on their side. Let's hope the PCC recognises that. After the 'Swan Bake' fiasco, it's time for the watchdog to bite

Mohammed Elsharif
Guest Editor
assria74@hotmail.com

the first time in many years, journalists are challenging their paper and refusing to write inaccurate and unfounded stories. We think this an example of ethical journalism."

But he added: "We expect that the PPC will not accept the complaint. We think that the PPC should review its procedures in relation to reporting asylum and refugees issues."

This is not the first time *Express* journalists have stood up to their bosses on this issue. In August 2001, the chapel passed a motion "expressing disapproval at the sustained campaign against asylum seekers in pursuit of circulation".

The PCC said it had yet to receive the letter and the *Express* was unable to comment. But BBC R4's the *Medium Wave* ran a big feature on the issue on 6 Feb.

Frontline Club welcomes exiled journalists

'On the Receiving End' is the title of a special RAM meeting for exiled journalists to be held at the Frontline Club in London's Paddington on Thursday 4 March. The recently opened club for international journalists is dedicated to the memory of eight freelances who lost their lives in recent conflicts.

The event will include a screening of the RAM video, the launch of the new PressWise/NUJ/UNHCR leaflet on reporting asylum issues, and preview the European Week of Action on coverage of refugees. Speakers will include a founder member of the EJN, Arop Madut-Arop from Sudan.

Find out more about The Frontline Club at www.thefrontlineclub.com/

Home Office criticises *Mail* for using 'old figures'

"Britain takes 1 in 5 of the Western world's asylum seekers – more than any other country," screamed the *Daily Mail*'s front page headline on 22 Jan. In frenzied coverage of a report from the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, the paper claimed that Britain had "failed to turn the asylum tide". There was just one problem: the figures were from 2002, before the implementation of the Nationality and Immigration Act, which halved the number of applicants from its peak of 9,000 in

October 2002. The Home Office immediately criticised the *Mail*'s use of the "old figures", and said the OECD figure of 110,700 applicants in 2002 was more than 70,000 too high.

The *Mail* also played down the OECD's analysis of applications with respect to population size, which showed that the UK was actually eighth in the league tables, well behind Austria, Norway, Sweden, Switzerland and Ireland.

But 'UK eighth in asylum league tables – numbers down since 2002' isn't such a catchy headline, is it?

Guard sacked after Yarl's Wood racism exposé

One security officer has been sacked and two others disciplined after an investigation into allegations of racism and abuse at Yarls' Wood immigration detention centre.

An undercover journalist from the *Daily Mirror*, who was given a job by operators Group 4, claimed that some officers were racist and had bragged of beating people being held there.

A Home Office inquiry into the allegations is due to be published next month. It is being conducted by Prisons ombudsman Stephen Shaw, who is also heading up an inquiry into the Feb 2002 fire at the centre.

UN Secretary General issues stark warning

Europe's anti-immigrant agenda is "de-humanising" and killing people, Kofi Annan, the Secretary General of the United Nations, has warned. The former UN High Commissioner for Refugees told the European Parliament: "The public has been fed images of a flood of unwelcome entrants, and of threats to their societies and identities. In the process, immigrants have sometimes been stigmatised, vilified, even de-humanised." He also drew attention those who are "suffocating in trucks, drowning at sea, or perishing in the undercarriage of aircraft," and said: "This silent human rights crisis shames our world".

The comments, made while accepting a European human rights prize, come as the EU is drawing up a common asylum policy, so far dominated by tough measures against illegal immigrants and 'bogus'

refugees. "Migrants need Europe. But Europe also needs migrants. A closed Europe would be a meaner, poorer, weaker, older Europe. An open Europe will be a fairer, richer, stronger, younger Europe – provided you manage migration well," he said.

RAM groups lead European protest

Refugee groups from eight European countries will turn the spotlight on hostile media coverage during a week of concerted action 15-21 March.

RAM is co-ordinating events in the UK and hopes that groups will take part by organising debates, lobbying media bosses or simply writing letters to the editor of their local newspaper.

A special meeting of RAM's network of exiled journalists on 4 March will promote the week of action, and RAM events at the NUJ annual conference in Liverpool will signal its end.

New research on the way the media covers refugees and asylum stories on the continent and in the UK will also be published.

"This is a chance for everyone involved in the RAM network to make their feelings about hostile media coverage known at national and local level. Every group has the chance to play a part," says RAM national co-ordinator, Terry Williams.

To discuss how you can support the week, or let us know what you've already planned, email Terry at williams.t@blueyonder.co.uk

Human rights must begin at home, says Amnesty

Amnesty International has called on the European Union to introduce new policies to combat racism, xenophobia and discrimination. A new report, *Human Rights Must Begin At Home*, also demands better protection for victims of human trafficking.

Amnesty's UK Director, Kate Allen, said: "It seems that the EU human rights machine is running out of steam. It's not enough for the EU to preach human rights abroad. First and foremost, Europe must look to itself."

The report calls on the EU to ensure that member states do not shift their responsibility for protection of refugees to third countries.

www.amnesty.org.uk/deliver/document/15091

EXILED JOURNALISTS SPEAK OUT

WHY THE MEDIA IS SO WRONG ABOUT ASYLUM AND THE NHS

MOHAMMED ELSHARIF is tired of stories accusing asylum seekers and refugees of 'swamping' the Health Service. In fact, they're helping to solve a major problem...

Since I have been in exile my mission has been clear: to support and empower the people in my community. I do this in two ways: by helping them voice their opinions and by assisting them to develop their skills. That enables them to use their education and experience for their own benefit, and also for the society they have arrived in. I strongly believe that refugees are - and should be recognised as - an asset to society.

This month, the media has carried several stories about refugees and asylum seekers 'swamping' the National Health Service. The case of Shirwan Sabir Mahmod, the 29-year-old former Kurdish policeman, who was seriously injured in a car crash, has been debated endlessly in the papers and on radio. Although his asylum claim was unsuccessful, he is still receiving costly treatment for injuries. On 16 Jan, the *Daily Mail* also ran the following headline: "Asylum is causing crisis for NHS, says Iraqi GP". A crosshead added: "Immigrant doctor swamped by his own countrymen". The message in both stories was clear: the NHS is under tremendous pressure and incomers are simply making it worse. Well, here is another story about the NHS and people who have claimed asylum.

One of the projects I'm proud to be part of is the Refugee Clinicians' Programme (RCP). This government-funded initiative aims to use the skills of thousands of unemployed refugee doctors, nurses, dentists and pharmacists to cover the serious shortages in the NHS. As Outreach Co-ordinator, my job is to identify refugees who have medical skills and qualifications.

"The Programme is about retraining refugee clinicians to achieve the necessary qualifications to work in the NHS. It's open to doctors, nurses, dentists and allied health professionals but primarily concentrates on current clinical shortage areas," says the RCP's project manager, Michelle Griffith. "Only refugees who have settled status in the UK and are free to live and work here without restrictions are eligible for the scheme. The programme aims not only to help them rebuild their lives and contribute to

the country that has given them sanctuary, but also helps the NHS make use of an untapped resource."

The programme originally focused on Avon, Gloucestershire and Wiltshire but has now been extended to cover the whole south west of England. It involves several stages that can take up to four years for a refugee to complete.

During the first stage, refugees are given assistance to establish themselves in the UK. Representatives on the programme help them find accommodation and provide emotional support. The second stage ensures that clinicians' English language skills are good enough, through study at the City of Bristol College. This may take a couple of years.

The next stage is to support them through the process of demonstrating clinical competence. Doctors, for example, have to take Professional Linguistic Assessment Board examinations. They also have access to post-graduate education centres, seminars and NHS Trust libraries to help them integrate into the NHS as quickly as possible. This also enables them to apply for registration or limited registration with the General Medical Council, the Nursing Midwifery Council or other bodies.

Following this, clinical attachments and work placements are set up. The length of these placements can vary between three and six months, and they enable clinicians to develop their medical terminology and understand the NHS' structure. Finally, clinicians are provided with all the advice and support that they need to search and apply for relevant posts within the service.

The programme was launched in June 2003 and after four months, 28 clinicians had enrolled. Numbers on the programme vary but within two years, it aims to help 40 clinicians retrain and to get at least half of them into employment.

"I was helpless and jobless" says an Iranian doctor who enrolled on the scheme. "But now I'm positive, confident and have something to contribute". A Somali participant agrees: "The programme has assisted me in getting employment within the NHS. It also equipped me with the skills necessary to compete as a nurse, and contribute to the well-being of my host society."

It's a great programme, and one that's making a real difference to the NHS. But you'll probably never hear about it in the mainstream press.

Mohammed Elsharif worked as a newscaster and journalist for *Sudan National Television* and wrote for national newspapers in Sudan.

For further information about RCP call 0117 9045034 or e-mail: RCP@cityofbristol.ac.uk

MAPPING THE REFUGEE SECTOR

6: UNITED NATIONS HIGH COMMISSION FOR REFUGEES

Emergency relief for refugees across the world

Pearl Thevanayagam looks at the world's largest refugee support organisation

Some 20.6 million people are currently classed as refugees – that's one human being in every 300. The United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) is the largest organisation in the world that helps them.

It was founded in 1950 to assist and protect refugees displaced by World War Two. When, in 1951, the Geneva Convention defined the term 'refugee' and set out international measures to protect people who are unable to return home because of a well-founded fear of persecution, the UNHCR became the body that implemented them.

Nowadays, it also assists internally-displaced people – known as IDPs – who would be considered as refugees but have not left their own country. To date, it estimates that it has assisted some 50 million people.

Although UNHCR provides emergency relief throughout the world, the UK office doesn't work directly with asylum seekers and refugees, focussing instead on shaping policy. It advises the government on international refugee laws and protection issues, and monitors how legislation is implemented.

"We tend not to get involved in individual cases," says Simon Taylor, Head of Press and Public Affairs for UNHCR in the UK. "However, we do take up one or two cases which are unique."

UNHCR-UK has a small team of lawyers that meets regularly with the Home Office and provides training to adjudicators. They also visit detention centres and liaise with refugee support groups, such as Refugee Action and the Refugee Council. Another important function is providing legal firms with information about countries for use in appeal cases.

UNHCR FACT SHEET

Number of UK staff: 12
Number of volunteers: 12

Global budget (2003):
US\$1.16 billion (£644 million)

UK Head Office

Millbank Tower, 21-24 Millbank
London SW1P 4QP
Tel: 0207 932 1020
Fax: 0207 630 5349

Website

www.unhcr.ch

UK Representative

Anne Dawson Shepherd

Head of Press and Public Affairs

Simon Taylor
Mobile: 07775 566127
Email: taylor@unhcr.ch

Unlike other United Nations bodies, UNHCR receive its funds directly from donor governments, rather than via the UN. The largest donors are the USA, Japan, the Netherlands, Norway, Sweden and the UK.

"UNHCR-UK plays a crucial role, in that we tell the media, many of which have centres in London, what UNHCR is doing around

the world," says Taylor. It rarely holds press conferences, but when asylum issues are discussed in parliament and the media, it gives comments and analysis. Its views are often different from those expressed by NGO refugee groups.

Taylor explains that it is not a campaigning organisation. Rather, it provides governments and other NGOs with statistics and accurate reports from its other offices around the world.

"We work closely with the government and agree to disagree on certain issues," Taylor continues. "We also act as a bridge between refugee groups and government, and we do not take sides. Regarding Section 55, which compels an asylum applicant to prove he [sic] claimed asylum at the first available opportunity to qualify for NASS support, we expressed our concern to the government.

"In the UK we work increasingly with those who failed in their asylum claim and want to return to their country voluntarily. For example, we provide information on local conditions in Afghanistan to community groups and individuals.

"While we don't take part in the government's forcible returns, we ensure the safety of voluntary returnees and provide both financial and material support. Up to 300 Afghans have been returned in the last two years."

The UNHCR says that the top source countries for asylum seekers coming to the UK are Iraq, Zimbabwe, Afghanistan, Somalia, China, Sri Lanka, Turkey and Iran. Taylor added that the situation in Iraq is volatile at the moment and people are still not returning home, even though military action there has officially ended.

'PEG' BOARD

Help to set the media agenda by generating stories rather than having to react to theirs. Keep your ears and eyes open for events that can provide you, and the media with a 'peg' on which to hang positive stories about refugees or asylum seekers.

Keep your media contacts informed about what is happening and why it is relevant for them.

**February to July
FREE TRAINING FOR REFUGEE WOMEN**

Organised by the Refugee Women's Association, various courses are available for refugee women living in the UK. Courses include Accelerated English, Childcare (leading to a vocational qualification), Business Start-up, Job Search, Mentoring and Capacity Building for women's groups.

All courses are free, run within school hours, travel costs and contributions towards childcare paid.

Venues: Various around London

For more info, contact 020 7923 2412 or rwa@refugeewomen.org.uk

**February and March
FREE IMMIGRATION ADVISORY COURSES**

A series of courses on immigration and asylum advice are being held throughout the UK. The courses are being run and funded by the Office of the Immigration Services Commissioner (OISC).

Venues: various
For more info, contact info@oisc.gov.uk

**Tuesday 10th February
9.30am - 3.00pm**

"INFORMED CHOICES: POSITIVE OPPORTUNITIES"

Organised by the Glasgow Council, a national conference aiming to influence the promotion of access to social care, social work education and

careers for people from ethnic minority communities. With speeches from Euan Robson MSP Deputy Minister for Education and Young People.

Venue: Exhibition Hall, Royal Concert Hall, Glasgow
For more info, contact Bryan Healy on 0141 332 2444 or visit www.gcvs.org.uk

**Wednesday 11 February
9.00am - 5.00pm
THE FUTURE OF RACE RELATIONS IN THE SOUTH WEST**

Organised by The Media Monitoring Group, a conference aiming to provide an opportunity for black and other ethnic minority organisations to shape a regional race relations agenda. Speakers will include: Lord Herman Ouseley, Imran Khan and Glyn Ford MEP tbc.

Venue: Plymouth Guildhall, Armada Way, Plymouth
For more info, contact Nick Cater on 01458 251727 or email caterrefugee@yahoo.co.uk

**Wednesday 11 February
6.00pm
SLEEPOUT**

Organised by Coalition Against the Destitution of Asylum Seekers (CADAS), a sleepout to support the fight against the governments asylum policies that lead to destitution for asylum seekers.

Meeting point, Nelson's Column north side, bring sleeping bags warm clothes.

Venue: Trafalgar Square, London

For more info, contact Rhon Reynolds on 020 7582 1990 or email rhon@blink.org.uk

**Sunday 15th February
2.00pm - 4.30pm
BRITAIN'S GUANTANAMO**

The third symposium organised by The Manifesto for Peace and Progress, discussing the issue of Internment Without Trial in Belmarsh prison. The speakers will include: Shami Chakrabarti - Director of Liberty, Hugo Charlton - Chair of the Green Party and Gareth Peirce - Solicitor.

Venue: Friends Meeting House, Euston Road, London (opposite Euston station)

For more info or to reserve places, tel 07816 823437, email vivian@peaceandprogress.org or visit www.peaceandprogress.org

**Wednesday 18 February
PRESENT TENSE:
FUTURE PERFECT?**

Organised by NCVOs, an annual conference with high profile speakers such as, The RT HON Gordan Brown, Lord Sebastian Coe OBE and Stuart Etherington devilvering a state of sector address. Supporting seminars will be held on issues such as accountability, diversity and public service delivery, amongst others.

Online booking is available, conference brochures provided on request.

Venue: The Brewery Conference Centre, Chiswell Street, EC2, London

For more info, contact Gillen Knight on 020 7520 2446, email annual.conference@ncvo-vol.org.uk or visit <http://www.ncvo-vol.org.uk>

**Monday 23 - Wednesday 25 February
PRAXIS RCODP EXCHANGE PROGRAMME**

Organised by Praxis, a three-day event as part of the Refugee Community Organisation Development Project (RCODP). The project aims to arm refugee community organisations with the knowledge and experience to be more effective in meeting the needs of refugees.

Venue: London tbc
For more info, tel 020 7729 7985 or email admin@praxis.org.uk

**Thursday 24 February
6.30pm
FREEDOM FOR KURDISH JOURNALISTS**

Organised by the NUJ, a public meeting to help address the problems faced by exiled journalists from Turkey. Chaired by Tim Gopsill (NUJ, The Journalist) speakers will include: Nick Medic (Communications Officer,

Cemal Ucer (Union of Journalist from Kurdish), Judith Vidal-Hall (Index on Censorship) and Jeremy Dear (NUJ General Secretary).

Venue: NUJ, Headland House, 308 Gary's Inn Road, WC1 (5 min from Kings Cross station)
For more info, contact Estella on 020 7586 5892, 020 7250 1315 or e-mail estella24@tiscali.co.uk or knklondon@gn.apc.org

**Wednesday 25 February
7.30pm
IN BLACK AND WHITE**

Organised by Centerprise Literature Development Project, a debate examining diversity in the UK publishing industry and asking some demanding questions. The Panel will include: Alison Morrison, Head of Marketing, Associate Director at Walker Books. Tickets £6.00/4.00
Venue: The Barbican Centre, London EC2
For more info, contact Fiona Fieber on 020 7249 6572 or The Barbican Box Office on 020 7638 8891, minicom 0207 382 7297

**Saturday 28 February
12.00 noon - 5.00 pm
NCADC - NATIONAL MEETING**

This national meeting will bring together old and new Anti-Deportation campaigns and people wanting to start campaigns. Lunch will be provided for all participants, and there will be a creche. Reasonable travel costs will be reimbursed by NCADC.
Venue: Hinde St Methodist Church, 19 Thayer Street, London (Tube: Oxford Circus or Marble Arch)
For more info, visit www.ncadc.org.uk

**14 – 20 June
REFUGEE WEEK 2004**

The Refugee Council and refugee community organizations have started planning for Refugee Week, which will take place in July.
For more info, or to make sure your event is included, contact Lucy Crompton on 02078203105 or lucy.crompton@refugeecouncil.org.uk