



still human still here

The campaign to end destitution of refused asylum seekers

Action Week, 20-26 February 2012

Background Information

Campaign Overview

Tens and thousands of people who have fled war, torture and political oppression are destitute or living in extreme poverty in Britain without enough to meet their essential living needs of food, clothing and health. This is a result of current policy which leaves asylum seekers with inadequate support or completely destitute, and prohibits them from working to support themselves. They have come to this country seeking safety, but are forced to rely on family, friends and charities to survive.

In recent years, thousands of refused asylum seekers have been forced into destitution due to policies which leave them in state of limbo, without status and unable to return home. The support available to all asylum seekers has also been rapidly decreased, meaning that even those who are supported by the state are living in poor housing and in extreme poverty - most on around just £5 day.

STAR is part of Still Human Still Here, a coalition of more than 50 organisations that are campaigning for a fairer asylum system in which nobody is forced to live in poverty or destitution.

For Action Week 2012 we are calling on the Government to make the support system fairer and ensure that all asylum seekers have enough to live on.

Specifically, we are asking the Government to:

- Ensure that all asylum seekers are **adequately supported** until they are either given protection in the UK or returned to their country of origin.
- Make sure that when they introduce annual increases to Income Support in line **with inflation**, they do the same for asylum support rates too
- Provide asylum seekers with support rates equivalent to **at least 70% of Income Support¹, paid in cash²**, and increase the support rate for lone parents to 70% of Income Support *immediately*.
- Grant asylum seekers **permission to work** if their cases have not been resolved in 6 months or they have been refused but cannot be removed through no fault of their own.

What is the problem?

People who are seeking asylum in the UK are not allowed to work to support themselves. A few can, but only if they have been waiting for more than one year for an initial decision on their asylum case, and only in jobs where there are skills shortages, such as chemical engineers, experienced orchestral musicians or ballerinas!

¹ Income Support is a means-tested benefit designed to cover essential living costs for people that are not in full-time work in the UK.

² Refused asylum seekers who are on 'Section 4' support do not receive cash, but must use a prepaid cash card (see below).

Most asylum seekers who would otherwise be destitute are therefore forced to rely on support provided by the state. The level of support they receive is simply too low for them to meet their basic needs and forces them to live in extreme poverty. Most receive just over £5 a day.

Other asylum seekers are completely destitute because they have been refused protection and receive no support at all. Many of these people fear for their lives or cannot return home because of practical issues, such as lack of safe route, absence of necessary papers or illness.

Living in extreme poverty for those on asylum support, or in total destitution for others, has a direct and serious impact on individuals' mental and physical health. It leaves people isolated and extremely vulnerable to exploitation. Some are forced to work illegally in unsafe conditions, including as sex workers, in order to survive.

Who is being affected?

(i) People who are waiting for a decision on their asylum claims (Section 95)

Asylum seekers waiting for a decision on their claims can access 'Section 95 support'. This is a cash payment designed to be temporary in nature and sufficient to meet 'essential living needs', such as food, travel, communication costs, toiletries, and access to resources needed to pursue their asylum applications. Accommodation and fuel bills are paid for separately for those with nowhere to live.

In 1999, the Government set Section 95 support at 70% of Income Support –30% less on the basis that the support was temporary and utility bills were paid for separately. They noted that linking asylum support rates to Income Support rates was "generally quite helpful". Research by Still Human has confirmed that 70% of Income Support provides asylum seekers with the minimum they need to live on.

In recent years, Section 95 support has nevertheless been reduced to *well below* 70% of Income Support, making it extremely difficult for many asylum seekers to live.

Many asylum seekers on Section 95 support are single adults over 25 who receive just £36.62 a week (55% of Income Support). They are forced to survive on approximately £5 a day. Asylum seeking couples, lone parents and single adults under 25 years old receive an average of 67% of Income Support.

(ii) People whose asylum claims have been refused (Section 4)

If someone is refused asylum and has exhausted opportunities to appeal, they lose their right to accommodation and Section 95 support 21 days later. The main exceptions are families with children who should continue to receive Section 95 support, and those who are destitute and qualify for 'Section 4' support.

Asylum seekers on Section 4 support receive £1.23 less than they did on Section 95. This is delivered through a plastic payment card rather than in cash, making it impossible for them to access vital services like making phone calls, taking buses, or even getting a hair cut. It can only be used in certain shops and only £5 can be carried over each week, so they cannot get best value by shopping in markets or discount stores. Many asylum seekers feel stigmatised when using the cards and receive abuse from fellow shoppers. At the end of September 2011, just under 2,400 people received this form of support.

(iii) Destitution (why people don't sign up for Section 4)

Section 4 is only available to those refused asylum seekers who temporarily cannot return to their country of origin through no fault of their own (e.g. there is no safe route, they don't have the necessary papers or are too ill to travel). However, the majority of refused asylum seekers who are destitute are either not eligible for Section 4 support or will not sign up for it as to do so they must agree to take all reasonable steps to return home and they fear for their safety if they return. Many asylum seekers would rather face destitution than possible return to persecution.

As a result, some asylum seekers come to the end of the process and enter a state of limbo. For example, between 2002 and 2011, thousands of Zimbabweans were refused any form of status in the UK. They were left either destitute or on Section 4 for many years and not allowed to support themselves. The Government did not forcibly return them to Zimbabwe because it was not safe to do so.

What are the consequences?

In 2010, the British Red Cross alone assisted around 10,000 destitute asylum seekers in need of emergency assistance. A survey of their clients found that 28% slept rough at some stage and nearly 90% survived on one meal a day.

Living in extreme poverty or in a state of destitution leads to increased mental and physical health problems and forces asylum seekers to find other survival strategies like illegal work, prostitution, begging and street homelessness. In addition, destitution makes voluntary returns more difficult as people cannot properly consider return when they are focused on day to day survival.

A recent report by the Institute of Race Relations found that 28 asylum seekers took their own lives after their asylum claims were turned down during a five year period and attributed some of the deaths to the fact that the asylum seekers were destitute and unable to access social services. The cases documented included:

- ★ Serguei Serykh, his wife Tatiana and their 19 year old son Stepan, who were refused asylum in the UK and committed suicide from the balcony of their 15th floor flat in Glasgow on 7 March 2010. This was the date their support vouchers were due to be stopped.
- ★ Osman Rasukl Mohammed, an Iraqi asylum seeker who jumped from a tower block in Nottingham on 25 July 2010. He had been in the UK since 2001, was destitute and was having problems accessing legal advice.

Why campaign for change?

Policies which keep people in a state of extreme poverty or destitution help nobody. They have serious consequences for the mental and physical wellbeing of asylum seekers and cast shame on Britain. They also hinder the effective processing of asylum claims, e.g. by making it difficult for asylum seekers to stay in touch with the Home Office.

These policies are based on a mistaken assumption that the Government can reduce the number of asylum applications made in the UK and convince refused asylum seekers to return to their country of origin by making their lives here increasingly difficult. Making living conditions more difficult for those who have been refused asylum does not encourage people to return to their home country if they fear for their safety.

When government spending is being cut, it also doesn't make sense to force people who could work to live on benefits. Employment helps people to start rebuilding their lives and offers self-respect, dignity and a sense of belonging. It generates money for the economy as well as saving taxpayers' cash.

There is currently less pressure on the asylum system than there has been for more than 15 years due to the fall in asylum applications to less than 18,000 in 2010 - the lowest level since 1989. This gives us the perfect opportunity to take these simple steps and reform the system so that it is humane, efficient and fair.

What is the solution?

Asylum Support Rates

- All asylum seekers should receive sufficient cash support to meet their essential living needs until they are either granted protection or returned to their country of origin. This should be at least 70% of Income Support and paid in cash.
- In 2011, a British adult over 25 years old received £67.50 on Income Support. If asylum seekers were given just 70% of this amount they would receive £47.25 per week – roughly equivalent to the minimum estimate for essential living needs.
- Asylum support rates should also be linked to annual increases to Income Support in line with inflation, and given a lower cap of £45 per week.
- Support rates for lone parents should be increased to 70% of Income Support *immediately*.

The right to work

- All asylum seekers should be given granted permission to work if their cases have not been resolved in 6 months or they have been refused but cannot be removed through no fault of their own.

Still Human Still Here is also campaigning for the government to:

Improve decision making and ensure that all those in need of protection receive it; and

Provide free access to healthcare for all asylum seekers while they are in the UK.

Case studies

G: *“Often all I have to eat in a day is a bowl of porridge. I’m surviving on about £3 a week. I have to beg people I know for cash... All the time I have nightmares about people coming and beating me up. In these dreams someone is holding me down and I’m getting more and more scared.”*

In Zimbabwe, Gwas harassed and beaten because she was a member of the opposition Movement for Democratic Change. In the UK she was refused asylum and left destitute. Her health deteriorated and she was hospitalised and treated for conditions related to malnutrition. She has now been given protection in the UK.

Anonymous: *“I had no money to take a taxi to take my wife to the hospital. I have no money to take a bus ticket from the reporting centre, I have no money to take Halal food”.*

A, who is from the Democratic Republic of Congo: *“I wake up hungry and go to sleep hungry... As asylum seekers we have been punished twice – once back home and once here”.*

H, who is from Iran and has been refused asylum, has made three suicide attempts while in the UK: *“Sometimes I begged for £1 or £2 to buy food, but begging made me feel very ashamed... When you’re sleeping outside one night feels like one year because it’s so cold. I never managed to sleep for more than an hour or two and when it’s raining it’s hard to sleep for more than fifteen minutes at a time.”*

Find out more

- Useful web pages:
 - Still Human Still Here campaign resource page – <http://stillhumanstillhere.wordpress.com/resources/>
 - Student Action For Refugees – <http://www.star-network.org.uk/>
- Useful reports:
 - ‘At the End of the Line: Restoring the Integrity of the UK’s asylum system’, <http://stillhumanstillhere.files.wordpress.com/2009/01/at-the-end-of-the-line-2010.pdf>
 - ‘Still Destitute: A Worsening Problem for Refused Asylum Seekers’, Joseph Rowntree Charitable Trust, http://stillhumanstillhere.files.wordpress.com/2009/01/still_destitute_report_2009.pdf
 - ‘Driven to Desperate Measures’, Institute of Race Relations, <http://www.irr.org.uk/pdf/Driventodesperatemeasures.pdf>
- Film
 - Film on Destitution by Nick Broomfield <http://www.amnesty.org.uk/refugees>
 - ‘The Destitution Trap’, Refugee Action, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=S0-3IMOB4io>
 - ‘Forced to Flee’, Refugee Action
- Further resources:
 - ‘Mobiles, Money and Mayhem’, Refugee Action myth busting pamphlet, http://www.refugee-action.org.uk/RAP/PDFbooklets/RAPbook2010web_UK.pdf