

This edition of the STAR newsletter was guest edited by STAR Communication & Events Officer, Hannah Blythyn and STAR Intern Abby Yolda. Special thanks also to contributors: Peter, Etienne, Nadia, Maria, Jessie, Kate and Tammy.

Would you like to write for or edit STAR's newsletter? Tell the network about your STAR experiences, what motivates you to be involved with STAR or share examples of things you have done that have worked well. It's simple and you can get help from the team. Contact Hannah, Zuhra, Katherine or Natasha to have a chat about it. The next newsletter will be for the end of term and the deadline is 1st June.
Email: communications@star-network.org.uk or call 0207 840 4443.

The National Newsletter of STAR

STUDENT ACTION FOR REFUGEES

Issue 29 Spring Edition 2006



STOP THE DEPORTATION OF JUDITH AND MARIAH!

Twenty year-old Ugandan twins Judith and Mariah, fled to the UK in 2003 after Mariah and her mother were abducted by ADF rebel army and taken to a camp in the Congo where they suffered horrific mental and physical abuse, including torture and rape. The twins' mother was eventually shot dead. After the ADF were captured by the Ugandan government, Mariah was taken to prison and further tortured and raped by the Ugandan military.

Miraculously, she managed to escape and find her sister, at which time they fled to the UK with the help of their uncle, whose whereabouts is currently unknown. They were guest speakers at a recent meeting at the School of Oriental and African Studies, where they spoke about their

experiences in government detention centres since first claiming asylum in the UK. On 20th February, we heard that they had been detained once again in Yarl's Wood Detention Centre. The twins have now been arrested and detained by British immigration services a total of four times; causing them further emotional and psychological anxiety, never knowing when they may again be robbed of their freedom and rights. Their legal representation has been appalling. In spite of these ordeals, the girls had begun new lives for themselves, studying business at Enfield College prior to their re-arrest.

A petition was drawn up for Immigration Minister Tony McNulty to demand the girls be allowed to stay in the UK, and, with the support and assistance of Enfield College students, No Borders and STAR, a demonstration was held outside the Passport Office and Home Office. It is strongly believed that if returned they will be placed in a maximum security prison with little hope of escape. Judith and Mariah must not only remain in the UK, but also be free from the constant arrests by UK immigration services.

Jessie Thomas, SOAS STAR

AGE MATTERS! STAR TAKES ACTION ON AGE DISPUTES

ACTION DAY 2006 THURSDAY 23RD FEBRUARY

A cold and rainy day in the Scottish capital and students are outside having a 'sleep out'. On Merseyside students dressed as immigration officials challenged fellow students to take the British citizenship test. Down in Southampton students and members of the public were urged to 'guess the age' of young people in photos, practically demonstrating the issue behind STAR's current campaign. In Bristol, children's shoes were placed across campus to starkly represent the number of children asylum seekers currently detained in the UK.

This is just some of the fun and funky activities of STAR groups across the country on Action Day as members and supporters raised awareness of some of the issues faced by young people who have sought asylum in the UK.

This year's was STAR's fifth national day of action. Action Day was created to provide an opportunity for STAR members across the country to unite and raise awareness about asylum issues and to show that strength in numbers can make a real difference.

STAR youth members led Journey to Safety training – simulating the journey a person seeking refuge takes – with school students in Walsall. This was the first step in peer led training that will enable the students trained on Action Day to go on and train their peers.

Around twenty STAR university groups set up Age Matters! campaign stalls on campus and hundreds of letters were fired off to MPs. STAR is calling on the government to replace the current process for determining the age of a separated child seeking asylum – which often bases decisions on a child's appearance – with an independent decision making body.

Why Age Matters?

Young people seeking asylum in the UK often have no way of proving how old they are: no ID, no passport, no birth certificate. For separated children their appearance is often the only way their age is



STAR student members Andy and Tammy 'sleep out' in Edinburgh

decided – this is not an accurate or fair way of doing things. A wrong decision can leave a child alone and without the support or guidance they need or are entitled to. Separated children may've had to flee their home country because of fear of persecution or may be in the UK because they are victims of trafficking.

The Government says that every child matters. They must prove this by changing its policy to ensure that separated refugee children are supported through a fair process of age assessment by an independent decision making body.

In common with all of STAR's work, the Age Matters! campaign is youth-led and refugee-focused. The campaign grew out of concerns raised by STAR members; some of whom have had a refugee experience.

The next steps...

The action doesn't stop with one day. It is only the start. Members and supporters need to continue to apply pressure on their MPs to call for changes to the system.

STAR National Office contacted Minister for Immigration and Citizenship Tony McNulty on the matter, along with the shadow ministers for immigration and all four children's commissioners. Shadow Minister for Immigration, Damian Green and Scottish Children's Commissioner Kathleen Marshall have both been supportive and positive of STAR's Age Matters! campaign.

Further meetings are now in the pipeline, and an Early Day Motion will be tabled in the Houses of Parliament in the next month. A STAR delegation is also expected to meet MPs and Ministers in Westminster before the end of term – watch out for further details.

More Age Matters! news on page 2.

Search for a STAR!

Are you in touch with anyone who used to be a student or youth member of STAR? Or are you a former STAR? If the answer is yes to either of these questions then get in touch!

STAR is launching 'Search for a STAR' to find people who were members of STAR in their younger days (!) or whilst they were at university. STAR will be sending out an invite to a big reunion party in June to all the ex-STAR's it discovers. The event promises to be a night to remember at a prestigious London venue!

Please get in touch with STAR on 0207 840 443 or friends@star-network.org.uk for further details.

Dates for your Diaries:



- | | |
|-------------------|--|
| 18th – 19th March | Forced Migration Conference, University of East London |
| 22nd March | STAR Youth Get-together, London (email youth@star-network.org.uk for more info) |
| 24th – 30th April | Global Education Week |
| 29th April | International Dance Day |
| 4th May | Local Elections |
| 13th May | World Fair Trade Day |
| 29th May | International Day of UN Peacekeepers |
| 4th June | International Day of Innocent Children Victims of Aggression |
| 1st – 7th June | Volunteers Week |
| 17th – 18th June | STAR Summer Training |

STAR (Student Action for Refugees)
National Office, 3 Bondway, Vauxhall, London SW8 1SJ
Web: www.star-network.org.uk

Katherine Blaker, Chief Executive, katherine@star-network.org.uk, 0207 840 4442

Natasha King, Student Outreach Officer, students@star-network.org.uk, 0207 840 4444

Zuhra Bahman, Youth Outreach Officer, youth@star-network.org.uk, 0207 840 4425

Hannah Blythyn, Communications & Events Officer, communications@star-network.org.uk, 0207 840 4443

This newsletter is printed on 100% recycled paper

Registered Charity No. 1079042
 Registered Company No. 3902118

WHAT NOW ON AGE DISPUTES?

Blog your support on www.age-matters.blogspot.com

Sign up for more information by emailing campaigns@star-network.org.uk and urge your MP to back the EDM when it is tabled in Parliament.

Find out who your MP is by visiting www.locata.co.uk/commons

Download a letter from the STAR website (www.star-network.org.uk) and send it to your MP.

STAR groups and members could get in touch with their MP's constituency office and arrange a meeting – talk to them about Age Matters!, STAR and the voluntary work you do in their constituency.

STAR MEETING WITH CHILDREN'S COMMISSIONER FOR SCOTLAND

As part of the Age Matters! Campaign and Action Day, Katherine and I went to meet with Scotland's Commissioner for Children and Young People, Kathleen Marshall. Her role is to make sure that the rights awarded to children under the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child are not forgotten. As you may be well aware, children who come here seeking asylum have the same rights as children who were born in the UK. Therefore, STAR felt it was very important to get Kathleen on board for this campaign.

We were encouraged by Kathleen's response and knowledge of the issues faced by unaccompanied children. Before becoming Children's Commissioner, when people started to become aware of unaccompanied children seeking asylum in England, she raised this issue as being a potential problem for Scotland, which should be addressed. Unfortunately her calls were not paid attention to and now we live in a country where there are children slipping through the net and not enjoying the rights they are entitled to. Age disputes and young asylum seekers is an issue, which she has taken interest in and included in one of her reports to the Home Affairs Committee Enquiry into immigration control.

However, there is some debate as to whether she should be getting involved with such issues due to the fact that asylum and immigration are not devolved issues. Luckily, she has not paid attention to her critics and is keen to look out for the rights of children seeking asylum in Scotland with or without their parents. She also seemed willing to get her counterparts in England, Wales and Northern Ireland involved in these issues to make sure that asylum seeking children do not suffer for lack of an efficient age assessment system.

Tammy Gill, Chair, Edinburgh STAR



Edinburgh STAR raise awareness on campus

TAKING THE TEST!

— Action Day came round quicker than expected, and as usual it was a mad rush around, from the planning sessions and brainstorming at meetings, to setting up the stall in the Guild and getting our Immigration Desk up and running! We've focused mainly on volunteering this year, so we decided to do something practical and visual to get an



Liverpool STAR 'immigration' at work

important message across to students who wouldn't usually consider coming to meetings. And you don't get much more visual than an Immigration Desk, complete with police hats and stickers!

We decided to centre the stunt on the Citizenship Test, asking students to complete a few questions from the test, to mark their answers and see just how "British" they are. Anyone who has attempted the test will know how ludicrous and irrelevant many of the questions are, from "What would you do if you spilled a pint over someone in a pub?" to "Which order are the British Saints days?" They highlight the impossibility of defining "Britishness", and the misuse of labels, something, which is particularly pertinent in British mass media regarding asylum seekers.

Action Day raised a few eyebrows, encouraged people to sign anti-deportation petitions, and – most importantly – made people think a little. The positive response from all involved has encouraged us to plan more events in the future, so watch this space!

Nadia Mohammed, Chair, Liverpool STAR

SAVE THE CHILDREN BACKING FOR AGE MATTERS!

STAR has been working with a number of external organisations on the Age Matters! campaign.

Save the Children has recently given their backing.

"Save the Children supports STARs campaign 'Age Matters'. We are especially concerned that the onus to prove age lies with the young person and that age disputed young people are detained with adults. Social Services are often able to establish that many of these children are under 18 subsequently. Age assessment is not an exact science and an independent and holistic approach, in Save the Children's opinion, the way forward to ensure children are protected and their best interests guaranteed"

Rona Blackwood, Assistant Programme Director, Save the Children, England Programme.

DEDICATED TO BEN – AN ENTERTAINMENT EXTRAVAGANZA IN SWANSEA

On 20th February Swansea STAR hosted an evening of live music and international dance at the Monkey Café. We raised a brilliant £560, bringing our total raised at events for local refugee and asylum groups to over £1000 since September. The money will go to Asylum Justice and Swansea Bay Asylum Seekers Support Group who run the drop-in centre we help out at.

The evening was dedicated to Ben Lockwood who was the founder of Swansea's STAR group, and a legend in his own right! He sadly died in a road accident just before Christmas. His recognition amongst the refugee and student population here was made apparent throughout the night, with many of his friends contributing to the entertainment. From stunning Native American hoop dancing to blues and funk bands, African influenced shamanistic drumming and a traditional Bushman dance the show seemed never ending!

The night was a huge success, not only in the funds we raised but in bringing so many people together to have a good time, increasing their understanding of the situation for Refugees and Asylum seekers and to get people aware of what STAR does. We all certainly enjoyed it and danced away to the global beats of DJ Nkonu until the early hours of the morning – just how Ben would have liked it!!



An artist in action!

Maria Parisi, Swansea STAR

The return of the voucher...

On 29th October 2001, the then Home Secretary David Blunkett announced the scrapping of the voucher system for asylum seekers after a vigorous campaign run by the Refugee Council and other supporters. Under that voucher scheme asylum seekers were not given any cash to live on but just given vouchers that could only be used in certain shops, that singled them out and exposed asylum seekers to hostility, and were a nightmare to administer.

At the time they were ditched David Blunkett described vouchers as "too slow, vulnerable to fraud and felt to be unfair by both asylum seekers and local communities." Yet since April 2005 the Government has reintroduced voucher support worth a pitiful £35 a week for failed asylum seekers who have agreed to return to their home country but for good reasons are unable to travel back, perhaps due to a personal medical problem or instability in their home country.

As part of the Immigration, Asylum and Nationality (IAN) Bill the Government has agreed that this £35 voucher does not cover

all the needs of this vulnerable group – for instance baby clothes. However, despite all the injustice caused by vouchers the Government has made it explicit that this support has to be supplied in voucher form, not through cash.

Vouchers are an expensive and inefficient way to deliver products and services; exposing vulnerable people to abuse, and often requiring them to use shops which are nowhere near their accommodation.

In practice, many vouchers are exchanged for much less than their real cash value for instant cash, and often can't be used for their full value in any case as shops aren't allowed to give change for vouchers.

Please contact your MP and let them know:

- That you are grateful that the Government recognises that failed asylum seekers who cannot return home need extra support. But £35 a week is not enough to live on;
- That vouchers have been tried in the past and have failed. They are an administrative nightmare, stigmatise the people who use them, and are impractical;

Positive Pictures

There are many ways to express our emotions, angers, fears and hopes. However, no organisation has found a better way to do so than PhotoVoice, a charity that helps young refugees aged 12-18 to express their experiences and ambitions through photography. The organisation also brings together young people who have lived and grown up in East London and encourages them to highlight, through photographs taken by them, what shines in their spirit and their determination to succeed, in spite of their circumstances.

The PhotoVoice exhibition, held on Thursday 23rd February, helps many of the participants to understand the social isolation and the hardest aspects of life many young refugees have to cope with when they arrive in the U.K.

These young people learn some of the latest digital media technologies and skills, build confidence in their voices, overcome barriers and build lasting friendships. It's amazing to see young people putting a vivid flavour of what life is like for people trying to make a new start, removing all the negative portrayals of refugees. Their stories take us behind the headlines where refugees are often portrayed as statistics, victims and scroungers. For more info and to watch the photos visit www.photovoice.org and click on Moving Lives.

Etienne Bell, STAR youth member

- That support for failed asylum seekers who cannot return home should be supplied in cash, not in vouchers. People are not going to be falling over themselves to get into the UK at the prospect of £35 a week in cash if their asylum claim fails!;
- That they can download a full briefing from the Refugee Council and other concerned organisations at http://www.refugeecouncil.org.uk/infocentre/asylumlaw/parliamentary_briefings.htm
- That you want them to challenge these measures when they are debated and write to you with their response. Ask them to sign the Early Day Motion (laid by Diane Abbott MP) and to contact Tony McNulty MP, Minister for Immigration.

Please pass on any reply you receive to Jonathan Cox, Parliamentary and External Relations Officer, by email (jonathan.cox@refugeecouncil.org.uk) or post (Refugee Council, 240-250 Ferndale Road, London, SW9 8BB).

Jonathan Cox, Refugee Council

JOURNEY TO SAFETY

After a nice hot cup of coffee, all was set for 'Journey to safety' but first it was the journey to Birmingham. There was good laughter and nice chats on the comfortable train. On the train, Zuhra briefed us on the training and what is expected of us. For me, it was my first time to hear of 'Journey to Safety' and so I had two challenges to overcome. One was to learn and understand 'Journey to Safety' and the other was to prepare myself to take part in the workshop on creating awareness of 'Journey to Safety'. This was a big challenge, as I had to overcome my nervousness and find the courage and self-confidence to make this a success.

I felt that, as an individual, I not only improved my confidence and courage but I also learned what 'Journey to Safety' was all about and the different challenges that people meet on their way to finding somewhere safe. I couldn't help noticing that the rest of the students in the training shared the same sentiments and feeling at the end of the workshop. They all saw things differently and clearer than before and not as they are portrayed by the media. We also learned how to treat people nicely who have gone through such tough times and make them feel welcomed and at home. We are all human beings regardless of skin colour, religion, and origin. Tomorrow it might be you, nothing is certain and there are no guarantees in life. Thanks to 'Journey to Safety' I learned this and much more.

Peter Mwangi, STAR Youth Member

LEEDS STAR HOSTS 'NIGHT OF A THOUSAND DINNERS'

At Leeds University we dedicated the whole week of 20th to 25th to promote STAR on campus. The highlight of the week for us was our Night of a Thousand dinners event. The idea was that you brought a dish of food with you that represented your 'home country' and it was laid out on a big table for all of us to share. Those that chose not to bring food were asked to make a donation and it was free for asylum seekers and refugees. The range of food that we had was unbelievable: from classic baked beans, couscous, gorgeous Italian pasta, African aboutie (yummy), to fresh bread and houmous... not to mention the puddings – jelly, cakes, banoffee pie... got to stop, I'm making myself hungry just thinking about it! The event worked so well because it brought people together in such a relaxed and informal setting. The United Nations Association also supported the event, which meant a lot of their members were able to come and share the fun. We were really pleased with the number of asylum seekers and refugees that meant a lot of their members were able to come from our conversation class and some of their food was amazing. We had around 70 people there and everyone was really generous, we raised nearly £200 to donate to destitute asylum seekers through a Leeds-based charity working with asylum seekers (LASSN). The rest of the week continued to be a great success and ended with a Brazilian themed night on Action day – good excuse for a party!

Kate Nottidge, Chair, Leeds STAR



INCLUSIVE SECONDARY SCHOOLS (APRIL 2005 – APRIL 2008)

This three-year national research project, funded by the KPMG Foundation and managed by the Refugee Council will examine and test ways to strengthen the involvement of parents/carers and refugee community organisations in refugee children's schooling. The first phase of the multi-method research will include a survey as well as focus groups and in-depth interviews. The next project phase will set up pilot partnerships between schools and refugee community organisations, with a view to addressing factors that impact on parental/carer involvement and developing good practice.

STAR is involved in the project as young people's consultant with two fold responsibility – taking an active part in the project by conducting interviews and focus groups with young people during the research phase of the project and secondly by ensuring that young people's opinions and experiences are taken in to account throughout the project.

For more info please contact Zuhra Bahman
youth@star-network.org.uk

Lisa Doyle and Zuhra Bahman

THE NEW ASYLUM MODEL

What is it?

In February 2005 the UK Government started introducing the New Asylum Model, or NAM as part of a new five-year asylum strategy. The aim is to have all asylum cases processed through the NAM by the end of 2006.

Why introduce a new asylum model?

The Government hopes that the NAM will improve the quality of decision-making by immigration officials and also speed up the processing of cases and ultimately increase the removal of 'unfounded cases'.

What are the key elements?

- Cases will be allocated to one of 9 processes, known as 'segments', which will be decided by the characteristics of the claim
- Each asylum case* will be dealt with by one IND* case worker* throughout the entire length of the case.
- Several segments intend to make a decision on an asylum claim within 11 working days (known as fast track)

What about detention?

As things stand, the detention criteria will remain unchanged and there are no new "detained fast track segments" mentioned. However, the Government has previously said that it envisages 30% of people claiming asylum will be detained and may be routinely "tagged".

Segmentation – what is it?

Which segment a person's is placed into will affect the speed at which their case is processed, how and when they can give evidence about their case, to what extent they will be assisted to have access to legal aid and how they are monitored by the Government.

There are nine segments. Examples of segments include:

- Cases where the person claiming asylum passed through and stayed in another country before arriving in the UK and their case can therefore be dealt with by that country.

- People claiming asylum who are separated children
- Where somebody doesn't claim asylum soon after arrival in the UK, but at a later date E.g. expiry of a student visa
- People from countries recognised as 'safe', which would mean the person only has the right to appeal any decision on their case from outside the UK.

What are STAR's main concerns about the New Asylum Model?

Although having a dedicated case worker for each asylum case is a positive step, there are concerns that improvements in actual decision-making will not take place. There are also concerns that placing a case in a segment will discriminate against the person claiming asylum by making a judgment on their case before hearing any evidence. Any process that entails fast tracking such as late and opportunistic cases is dangerous because it may prevent people from having an opportunity to accurately present their cases. Furthermore, vulnerable people, for example, women who have been trafficked, people experiencing mental ill health, will need time and support to disclose sensitive and crucial information.

EXPLANATORY NOTES

IND

Immigration & Nationality Directorate. The department of the Government responsible for processing and deciding each asylum claim in the UK.

Case

When someone claims asylum, their claim is known as a case

Case-worker

People who work for IND on cases are called case-workers.(under the NAM they are called Caseowners)

GRADUATING THIS YEAR?

The next couple of months will be an end of an era for many STAR members, as you move on to the next exciting phase of your life. Many of us will be familiar with the last weeks and months of university – endless hours of coursework, revision and nail biting to get the degree we want. Everything else seems to go out of the window. If there is one thing that you do for STAR and helping refugees this year... Then make it becoming a 'Friend of STAR'.

By becoming a 'Friend of STAR' you will be able to stay involved with STAR activities and support STAR when you are no longer a student member. You'll receive the newsletter, other merchandise and invites to STAR events and Friends functions.

Of course, a big thank you goes out to graduating STAR members for all the hard work they have put in over the years.

**If you want to become a 'Friend of STAR' then email
communications@star-network.org.uk**