

INTERCULTURAL CITY

MAKING THE MOST OF DIVERSITY



THE LIFE TRAJECTORIES OF
ASYLUM SEEKERS AND REFUGEES

Adam Mornement

The ambitions of this report are two-fold: To identify conditions or interventions that might accelerate the process of asylum seekers and refugees becoming productive, interactive members of British society; and to paint a picture of the asylum seeker's experience in Britain since the early 1970s.

Contents

- Acknowledgements
- A brief history of British asylum policy, 1905-2005
- Approaches to managing asylum seekers and refugees
- Refugee's stories – The experiences of four refugees who have arrived from different parts of the world at different stages since 1972
 - Raisak Patel
 - Alfredo Cordal
 - Laura Villegas
 - Dr Diar Aref
- Conclusions
- Appendix – The Home Office asylum process, 2005

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A brief history of British asylum policy, 1905 - 2005

Research for this report began at around the time of the 2005 general election. It was an election campaign in which asylum policy was a key party political battleground. To many, the Conservative Party's slogan, 'It's not racist to impose limits on immigration,' was an unwelcome reminder of how intolerant Britain can be.

"The receptive audience the Conservatives have attracted in highlighting immigration suggests that despite all the contributions of black and Asian athletes, authors, musicians and midwives over the past 50 years, this nation's multicultural fabric is not woven half as tight as some might like to believe," wrote Gary Younge in the *Guardian*¹.

The May 2005 election was almost exactly a century on from the Aliens Act², which targeted 'undesirable aliens' planning to make their home in the UK. 'Undesirables' were described as, paupers, lunatics, vagrants and prostitutes. The diseased and criminal could also be refused entry.

Prior to 1905, Britain's open-door policy was widely regarded as a symbol of the pre-eminence of British democracy. "Liberal politicians were proud of the British tradition of welcoming the oppressed. They were anxious to defend foreigners' rights to benefit from British democracy. This would keep alive the standing of Britain as the benevolent motherland of the empire, teaching her subjects the way forward in civilisation."³

The Aliens Act changed everything. It meant that asylum was no longer an unchallenged right of anybody fleeing persecution. It is also made the experience of seeking asylum a political act, a status that it retains today. "Britain was [now] a club with sharp restrictions on membership. For the century that followed, immigration would be buffeted by the shifting whims of party politics."⁴

Over the past 100 years policy on asylum and migration has been the subject of countless amendments and alterations. Between 1914 and 1945, legislative shifts were generally made to restrict the internal movement and arrival of 'enemy aliens'. Since the end of the Second World War, the ebb and flow of British economic wellbeing and public dissatisfaction have been more common motivating factors.

Until the early 1960s, in typical circumstances, members of the British Commonwealth were granted residency as citizens of the Empire. However, post-war poverty, and the rise of inward migration – a legacy of decolonisation and the growth of globalisation – precipitated a progressive clampdown⁵.

In 1962, in a bid to reduce the extent of inward migration from the colonies, the Commonwealth Immigration Act was introduced. Migrants were now required to collect vouchers to pre-qualify for residency.

¹ *Guardian*, 25 April 2005.

² The Aliens Act was enacted on 10 April 1905, and became law in January 1906. It was precipitated by the Jewish exodus from Russia and Eastern Europe.

³ Teichmann, Iris, *Credit to the Nation – refugee contributions to the UK* (Refugee Council, 2002)

⁴ Winder, Robert, *Bloody Foreigners, The story of immigration to Britain* (Abacus, London 2005), p 253.

⁵ The numbers of Commonwealth citizens moving to Britain were substantial. In the decade to 1961 almost 300,000 immigrants arrived. Winder, p 369

This was followed in 1971 by legislation that gave immigration officers powers to detain asylum seekers. The trend towards increasing restrictions upon asylum applicants continues today.

1999-2005

Recent years have seen radical changes to asylum policy, to streamline a system widely perceived to be slow and susceptible to abuse.

Under the 1999 Immigration and Asylum Bill benefit entitlement was removed to all asylum seekers. The Nationality, Asylum and Immigration Bill of 2002 focussed attention on the control and removal of asylum seekers.

Others recent measures introduced to discourage asylum applications include: limiting access to benefits, larger fines for traffickers, expanding the list of countries whose nationals need to obtain a visa when coming to the UK to transit on to a third country, and a minimum five-year residency requirement before becoming eligible for permanent settlement.

This tough line has been reinforced by the harmonisation of European Union policies, which leaves little room for liberal sentiment in the consideration of asylum applications⁶.

The Home Office describes the 2002 and 2004 Acts as: "A firm foundation for tough measures we have taken against traffickers and others seeking to abuse our immigration controls"⁷. And the measures are bearing fruit.

In 2004, 33,960 asylum applications were received in the UK, 31% less than in 2003, when there were 49,405 applications⁸. The fall in applications continued into 2005. Up to the second quarter of 2005, the average number of asylum applications per month had fallen by 76% since October 2002⁹.

Perhaps inevitably, the Government's tough stance has caused some problems. During the autumn of 2005, Section 9 of the Asylum and Immigration (Treatment of Claimants, etc) Act, 2004, provoked protests and dominated the headlines. Section 9 rules that failed asylum seekers who do not take 'reasonable steps' to leave Britain 'voluntarily' will no longer be entitled to benefits, including housing. Reduced to destitution, their children may be taken into care.

A report published by Barnados in November 2005 described Section 9 as, 'administratively disastrous' and 'inhuman'.¹⁰ Others questioned whether it would lead to a significant increase of families leaving the UK.

The tone of political debate on the subject has changed little over the past century, and risks perpetuating the cycle of distrust and negative feeling that began in 1905.

⁶ EU harmonisation was introduced in 2005.

⁷ Source: www.ind.homeoffice.gov.uk

⁸ In 2004, the top five asylum applicant nationalities were Iranian, Somali, Chinese, Zimbabwean and Pakistani.

⁹ All figures, www.ind.homeoffice.gov.uk

¹⁰ *The End of the Road*, Barnados (November 2005)

However, the recent period of intense legislative activity has run in parallel with significant shifts in mechanisms for the creation of conditions for asylum seekers and refugees to become active and productive members of society.

While Britain is still 'a club with sharp restrictions on membership', it might be argued that it has begun to assess the needs of its newest members in a more progressive light.

Approaches to managing asylum seekers and refugees – 1999-2005

In April 2000 the British Government set up a centrally administered National Asylum Support Service (NASS), to 'rationalise' the system of providing support to destitute asylum seekers¹¹.

The two pillars of the system were: the provision of vouchers in place of social security benefits; and a dispersal policy to ensure that asylum seekers' accommodation needs could be met in a way that relieved pressure on London and the South East, where the vast majority of migrants have gravitated for centuries.

Prior to April 2000, asylum seekers were supported in an ad-hoc manner. Under the new system, those who are unable to support themselves are eligible to apply for help from NASS, which provides subsistence payments and accommodation on a no-choice basis in one of 71 'clusters' around the UK¹².

NASS has contracts with housing providers in each of the cluster areas. The private providers are paid according to the number of asylum seekers housed, not according to the value of the property. So typically they buy properties in cheap areas, often deprived white working class districts. Accounts of residents resenting the newcomers are rife.

Dispersal policy has, and continues to have major implications for the towns, cities and regions to which asylum seekers have been sent. Many of the host communities do not have long-standing traditions of ethnic diversity; some have only very limited systems in place to support asylum seekers in establishing new lives in the UK.

However, some have been more successful than others at managing the process, and assisting recent arrivals to settle into full and active lives. Over the following pages, this report will refer to the experiences of Central Manchester, Bolton and Glasgow, cities and towns of different sizes each of which has handled the challenges presented by dispersal differently.

Dispersal – the early years

Dispersal policy has been operational for less than six years. This may not be long enough to make firm judgments about its social and economic impacts, but the development of techniques to fast track the productivity of recent arrivals may be instructive.

¹¹ NASS was introduced under the 1999 Immigration and Asylum Act.

¹² A cluster is a geographical area made up of one or more local authority. NASS aims to create language-based clusters around the UK. The aspiration is for 0.5% – or one in 200 – of the population to be asylum seekers in each cluster.

There is no doubt that dispersal came as a shock to the host towns and communities. No national guidelines or directives were issued. Local authorities were forced to manage as they saw fit. It was a major challenge. In the early days even Manchester, a large city with a long history of diversity, struggled.

Before dispersal Manchester was home to small but stable refugee communities – the largest was and remains Somali¹³. In 2000, the city agreed to provide emergency accommodation for asylum seekers dispersed by NASS. “Refugee Action was told to expect a couple of dozen people in Manchester, but by mid-2001 we were supporting over 1,700,” says Philip Davis, North-West Development Manager for Refugee Action¹⁴. The large numbers caused confusion, and in some areas social and ethnic unrest¹⁵.

Manchester certainly wasn’t alone. The issue that focussed minds in Glasgow, and received widespread coverage, was the murder of Kurdish asylum seeker Firsat Dag in 2001. “At that point, the Scottish Executive got involved, so the issues [around dispersal] were properly investigated, and more money became available to social inclusion partnerships,” says Brian O’Hara leader of the Glasgow Asylum Project.

Mike Wolfe, mayor of Stoke-on-Trent, commissioned a report to clarify the facts and challenge ‘commonly circulating myths’ about the rights of asylum seekers¹⁶. Misconceptions included: the idea that asylum seekers were ‘taking our jobs’; ‘receiving large cash handouts’; and overwhelming local services. The ambition of the report was to encourage the people of Stoke-on-Trent to consider asylum seekers as an asset, not a burden.

In Manchester, the organisation formed to respond to the dispersal of asylum seekers into the city was MARIM (the Multi Agency for Refugee Integration in Manchester). MARIM began life as a development agency, working with voluntary organisations on specific projects in Central Manchester. But experience on the ground suggested that this was not the best way for the organisation to operate. A different service was required.

Today MARIM has morphed into a primarily informational body. It is a vehicle for agencies working with asylum seekers and refugees in the city to network and build relationships.

¹³ There are much larger Bangladeshi and Pakistani communities in Manchester, which include refugees, but the Somali community is the largest that might be broadly categorised as a ‘refugee community’.

¹⁴ Refugee Action is an independent national charity that works with refugees to build new lives in the UK. For further information go to www.refugee-action.org.uk

¹⁵ In 2002 in North Manchester, there was a moratorium on further dispersals.

¹⁶ Emms, Paul, *Asylum Seeking in Stoke-on-Trent – a report of the Elected Mayor into Asylum Seekers in the city of Stoke-on-Trent* (Enquiry Committee, February 20)

The core team of three is focused on finding out what is going on in the city; which agencies are active and what their priorities are.

A member of the MARIM, who preferred to remain anonymous, said: “My job is to encourage Refugee Community Groups and support agencies to talk to each other. We try to know as much as possible about what’s going, to avoid duplication, and to identify areas of future need. We’re here to streamline and speed up the process. At the moment we’re working with agencies and schools in North Manchester, because there is a housing shortage, and that area could help to pick up some of the shortfall.”

The shift from project development to an overseeing role has allowed MARIM to identify what is not working, in order that fixing it becomes a priority.

The capacity to respond to changing circumstances underpins the approach taken by Bolton Metropolitan Borough Council. “When we started we had no idea how things would work, or what patterns of behaviour would evolve. Dispersal was an unknown quantity,” says Jon Lord, Head of the Community Housing Service at Bolton MBC, former head of housing.

“We already had some voluntary sector partners, and of course we had the support of the statutory agencies. So we based our approach around their expertise. We decided to spend our resources as and when they were needed,” says Lord. The outcome was a document of only five pages that described a commitment to a fast and responsive approach.

“We started by asking our existing active voluntary sector partners to see if they could transfer their skills. We didn’t want to complicate the situation. Willing volunteers were well placed to get things started,” says Lord.

One of those partners was the Bolton Counselling Service, which extended its befriending service to new asylum seekers. Another was a local Methodist Church that runs an offenders support service two and a half days a week. The group was encouraged to broaden its support to asylum seekers, meaning that educational opportunities, IT training and IT connections became available to them.

Similar initiatives have developed in Glasgow, particularly in recruitment. The Chamber of Commerce has set up the New Glaswegian Project, to break down barriers to employment in the city. The team offer advice on dress and interview techniques. They also lobby employers, to change their risk-averse views about employing refugees.

The Bridges Project, also in Glasgow, is a shadowing service for refugees and asylum seekers that matches opportunities with people. It is a means of optimising migrants’ skills¹⁷.

Creating the conditions for personal productivity

Nearly six years after dispersal was introduced, Bolton MBC is finally preparing a formal integration strategy. “We are doing it now because we know more about how dispersal works, and what the challenges are,” says Lord. “The document will be based on our approach to date. It will remain responsive, and action-based.” It will also

¹⁷ For further information go to, www.bridgesprogrammes.org.uk

crystalise some specific issues and techniques, all intended to fast track the social and economic potential of asylum seekers and refugees.

In practical terms, Lord believes that it is vital to encourage the development of Refugee Community Organisations (RCOs), organisations sometimes known as Refugee-Led Groups. These groups can offer sanctuary and support to newly arrived asylum seekers and refugees.

“Voluntary organisations have an important part to play in the process of creating RCOs,” says Lord. They provide a regular time and place to meet.

Assisting the incubation of RCOs can increase the chances of their leaders being known to local authorities, an important connection for the delivery of information and long-term support.

Since 2000, Refugee Action North-West has found that recent arrivals are far more likely to take the lead in setting up RCOs, than established refugees. “Particularly in the early years, it was first generation refugees, and some asylum seekers, who created the refugee led sector that provided an enormous amount of invisible and unrecognised support to their own communities,” says Davis of Refugee Action.

“It was the first generation that reached out, partly because in many dispersal areas there was no second generation. But even where there was, in cities like Manchester or Liverpool, it was the first generation who responded quickest,” he adds.

Getting migrants and refugees into employment is recognised almost universally as fundamental to the process of integration, offering a route to independence, self-respect and ties with the local community. “So you need employment services equipped to deal with refugees,” says Davis. This may mean ensuring that the relevant interpreting services are on hand, to aid access to benefits and services. It may also require the provision of English lessons suited to the standards of the applicants.

“You must also encourage small businesses run by migrants to exploit the critical mass of asylum seekers and refugees. It is so much easier for a two-man Iraqi business to grow if it has a local Iraqi workforce to call on,” says Lord.

Social care is also fundamental. “You need to know how to handle child protection. Poorly handled cases of child protection or domestic abuse have the potential to trip up the whole process [of dispersal],” says Lord. “You must have effective systems in place.”

The provision of legal support is another must. Experience indicates that if an asylum seeker believes their case has been heard fully and fairly they are more likely to feel comfortable in Britain, and responsive to their new environment.

Davis of Refugee Action expands the point: “To get the best out of asylum seekers and migrants, their well-being is absolutely vital. If people don’t feel well or cared-for, or are just sitting at home they are much less likely to integrate effectively. It might seem obvious, but if you want to get the best of people you’ve got to get them out of the house. A good way of achieving this is to encourage migrants to volunteer for local organisations. This can help with their confidence, their language skills and their social

contacts”.

Building one-to-one connections

If the role of local authorities is to respond to the situation on the ground, and create the conditions for asylum seekers and refugees to build productive lives in the UK, it is the Government’s responsibility to set the tone for future initiatives, and to provide funds for their delivery.

In recent years, the Home Office has supported a growing trend towards one-to-one mentoring as the most effective means of assisting refugees. Key features of ‘Integration Matters’, the national refugee integration strategy launched in March 2005 were the Time Together Project, and the Sunrise (Strategic Upgrade of National Refugee Integration Services) pilot schemes.

Time Together, run by the national charity TimeBank¹⁸, pairs volunteer mentors with refugees for five hours a month. The Project aims to: “Speed up the integration of refugees into UK society enabling them to realise their full potential; enhance refugees’ employment and integration prospects by placing them in volunteering opportunities where they can contribute their skills to the host community; and promote positive images of refugees in the media, helping to break down barriers between cultures and promote community cohesion.”

The initiative has been running since 2002, and initially operated in six cities – London, Birmingham, Glasgow, Manchester, Peterborough and Plymouth. In October 2005, with additional funding of £3.6 million received jointly from the Home Office and Treasury’s Invest to Save budget¹⁹, The Time Together Project expanded to Leicester, Nottingham, Portsmouth, Southampton, Brighton and London. Over the project’s lifetime 24 separate schemes will be established in cities across the country.

Sunrise is another mentoring scheme, run by voluntary organisations that bid for a share of Home Office funding. The idea is that refugees spend 17 hours one-to-one with a caseworker who help manage their transition from asylum seeker to refugee by getting them into housing and education, and generally providing the basic framework for an independent life in the UK. The caseworker also helps to break down barriers between communities and promoting refugees within the host community.

At the time of the writing, the four Sunrise pilot schemes were too nascent to have revealed any definitive findings²⁰.

¹⁸ TimeBank is a national campaign which exists to ‘inspire and connect’ people to share and give time. For further information about the Time Together Project go to: www.timebank.org.uk/mentor

¹⁹ The Invest to Save Budget is a joint Treasury/Cabinet Office initiative that aims to create sustainable improvements in the capacity to deliver public services in a more ‘joined up’ manner. A key principle of the ISB programme is that investment is provided in return for reform. For further information go to: www.isb.gov.uk/hmt.isb.application.2/index.asp

²⁰ The successful Sunrise bidders were: The Scottish Refugee Council (Glasgow,) Leeds Refugee and Asylum Service (Leeds/Sheffield,) Refugee Arrivals Project (West London) and Refugee Action (Manchester). In the 27 months from October 2005, the Sunrise pilot projects aim to help 1,200 refugees.

The future

While methods to fast track refugees into full and productive lives are developing fast, dispersal remains an emerging science. A Home Office report published in December 2005 revealed that asylum seekers were three times more likely to be assaulted in the poorest parts of Britain, typically areas where housing stock is available.

The same report suggested that if this approach is continued, there is a danger of creating ghettos of asylum seekers and refugees in these deprived areas. If this were to happen, the implications for fast-tracking their social and economic productivity could be severe.

However, lessons have been learned, both about the needs of host communities with limited experience of ethnic diversity, and of the newcomers themselves.

The following basic guidelines on how to fast track the productivity of asylum seekers and refugees might accurately reflect the views of the support groups and local authorities spoken to during the compilation of this report:

- Find ways to getting people into work as quickly as possible.
- Encourage existing voluntary groups and social support agencies to expand their services to include asylum seekers and refugees.
- Cultivate the creation of Refugee Community Organisations as vehicles to support refugees and asylum seekers, and to establish connections between refugee communities and local authorities.
- Focus on one-to-one mentoring and support as the most effective means of facilitating refugees' integration.
- Ensure that legal support and social services are available to all asylum seekers and refugees, to increase the chances that they feel cared for and fairly treated.

Refugee's stories

The four case histories that follow were selected at random, to reflect the incredible diversity of asylum seekers, and the factors that influence their experiences in the UK.

Rasik Patel, Alfredo Cordal, Laura Villegas and Dr Diar Aref offer a cross-section of ages upon arrival, genders and countries of origin. All arrived at different stages over the past three decades, a period of rising global migration and growing pressure on host countries.

Their stories demonstrate the impact of the social and economic conditions in Britain at the time of arrival, and reveal the significance of an individual's background and aspirations in defining their social and professional trajectory in exile.

Their experiences also suggest that there may also be identifiable stages of integration. First there is a period of respite, during which recovery and survival are the paramount concerns. This may be followed by a period of rebuilding; making sense of what has happened, and beginning to accommodate local customs and cultures.

The final phase, once the wounds have healed, is a period of full integration. Typically, it is only during these later years, perhaps 10-20 years after arrival, that the refugee is completely at ease and inclined to reach beyond their immediate environment and

community. It is often long-term refugees, perhaps during retirement, who volunteer their time to assist recent arrivals, passing on the benefit of their experience. Their legacy is also visible in their offspring, many of whom benefit from the social and economic platforms prepared by their parents.

This path is reflected in the evolution of Nueva Generación (New Generation), a centre for Latin American community arts in South London (see pages x-x). It started life in 1997, in a back room at Praxis, a charity that assists new residents to integrate in the UK. Back then it was a refuge, both for its founder and for other displaced South Americans.

As the years passed Nueva Generación began to play a role in understanding Latin American cultures, predominantly through creative expression – painting, music, theatre ... Today it is a magnet for people displaced people from all over the world.

The experiences of the four refugees also offer clues about what it takes to integrate into British culture, and the conditions and characteristics likely to stimulate intercultural behaviour.

In the three decades since his eviction from Uganda, Rasik Patel has recreated the life that was denied him by Idi Amin. He was always committed to entrepreneurship, independence and family. But now he is also a respected member of a community, a birthright in the village of Kasaw, Uganda.

Like many Hindus, Patel was brought up to believe in the benefits of initiative and private enterprise. This independence has underpinned his capacity and willingness to operate interculturally, developing relationships with a broad range of individuals and organizations, both professional and personal. But it is in the field of social contributions that his impact is particularly noticeable. In recent years, reflecting his status as a community leader, he has offered sanctuary to numerous asylum seekers, creating the framework for people from diverse cultures to prosper in a shared space.

Of the four interviewees, Alfredo Cordal's path to a full and productive life in Britain was the smoothest. As a Chilean socialist he was a beneficiary of left-wing political sympathies – his arrival coincided with the early stages of Harold Wilson's Labour Government. Cordal was also white, academically gifted and able to speak at least some English.

Within a year of arrival he was in full employment, living in private accommodation. Within less than a decade his first play had been performed in London, and he was fully integrated into the global community of poets and writers in exile.

Laura Villegas was a lawyer and political activist when she arrived in 1988. She was highly motivated to work, and play a role with the Colombian community in London. Unfortunately, poor English thwarted her professional ambitions, and an absence of cultural infrastructure accounted for her social aspirations.

Villegas fought hard to learn English, and remedied the second problem by establishing Nueva Generación, a meeting point for young displaced South Americans.

Through her work both as a legal advisor to Latin American migrants and refugees, and as a teacher at Nueva Generación, Villegas has offer sanctuary to a broad diversity of dispersed cultures, helping them to make sense of an alien environment, and build a platform for progress.

Like so many refugees, Villegas' was inclined to rebuild the life that had been taken away from her. After less than 20 years in the UK, she has achieved exactly that. The difference is that today, the cultural outcomes of her work reach far beyond the confines of Colombian and Latin American communities in London. Instead they are infused by and permeate British and countless other cultures.

Dr Diar Aref, an Iraqi doctor, is the most recent arrival. He fled Saddam Hussein's regime in 2002. His story since then has been one of survival, within arguably the toughest bureaucratic asylum framework in British history, and a culture increasingly suspicious of Muslims. Career development has been his priority. To date, reaching out to other cultures has not figured in his activities.

Rasik Patel (Mr)

Country of origin – Uganda
Arrived in the UK – 5 November 1972
Age on arrival – 25

Background

1947 – Born in Kasaw, a village near Kampala, capital of Uganda. One of ten children
1962 – Takes Ugandan citizen after the British colonial withdrawal
1966 – Leaves school after 'O' Levels, and takes a job as a travelling salesman in Zaire (Congo)
1970 – Sets up in business, running a grocery and clothing shop in Kasaw, and supplying goods to 34 local primary schools
August 1972 – Idi Amin 'has a dream' in which all Ugandan Asians left the country within 90 days. Rasik Patel flees to England

(Introduction)

In the decades since his eviction from Uganda, Rasik Patel has recreated the life that was taken from him. Once again he is a respected member of the community with a commitment to entrepreneurship, independence and family.

(Starts)

The economic success of the 28,608 ethnic Indians who fled Uganda to the UK in 1972 is extraordinary. "Within a year, at least 90% of us had been re-housed and were getting on with our lives independently," says Rasik Patel, a small business owner now based in Bristol.

Once established, the Ugandan Asians demonstrated a commitment to hard work and self-improvement – a 1991 study by Swansea University revealed that 37% of Ugandan Asian men were employed in managerial work, compared to 21% in 1981²¹.

²¹ *Roots of the future*, The Commission for Racial Equality, 1996, pp42-43.

Professor Vaughan Robinson of Swansea University, is a specialist in the field: “East African Asians²² have acquired better formal qualifications than their Indian or white British counterparts. They are overrepresented in self-employment, and have transformed their socio-economic profile more rapidly than either of the other two groups.”²³

Today it is thought that there are more Ugandan Asian millionaires than any other group of refugees or migrants in the UK.

Rasik Patel conforms to type. Six years after his arrival he bought his own business. Three years after that he identified an emerging market for two-way radios. In the first year of trading he turned over more than £1 million.

Rasik and his wife have also raised three children. Following the pattern of past generations, the eldest son works at the family business, in Easton, Bristol. Their younger son works in Information Technology; their daughter is an aspiring actress.

Like the majority of the ethnic Asians from Uganda, Patel is a Hindu. “My grandfather came from Gujarat in 1935, to work on the construction of the [British East African] railway from Kenya to Uganda. He was a farmer, but once work was complete on the railway he decided to stay on, and built a career as a trader. Uganda became his home.

“I was born in a small village called Kasaw, 38 miles from Kampala. We were completely integrated into life there. We had our own family business, which had been nominated by Government to oversee the sale of all local food products, like coffee, corn and soya beans. We were quite an important family.”

Patel left school after his ‘O’ Levels, and took a job as a travelling salesman in Zaire (Congo) for a pharmacy called OPAA. “But my father told me to stop working for somebody else, and set up my own business.”

By the age of 23, Patel was running a grocery and clothing shop. He had also won a tender to supply goods – everything from school uniforms to food – to 34 primary schools in the area.

“I became friendly with the teachers and headmasters. The facilities were quite poor. They would often say, ‘we need help’. I helped one school to raise funds for a building with five classrooms. First I went to the British Embassy, but they dismissed me as too young. The American Embassy was more generous. They gave us US\$90,000.”

The next problem was to find English-speaking teachers. On this occasion the Norwegian Embassy stepped in, sending 18 teachers to work in the schools supplied by Patel.

²² There was also a large population of ethnic Indians in Kenya, many of whom migrated to Britain from the late 1960s.

²³ *Guardian*, 15 August 2005.

Life was going well. Patel was a businessman and nascent community leader in a country that he loved. And then Idi Amin seized power from Milton Obote.

The following summer, Amin announced that he had been advised by a dream to give the Ugandan Asian community three months to leave²⁴. No reason was given.

Patel believes that Amin was influenced by Uganda's small population of black Muslims. "They wanted to control the country. The Asians were independent, hard working and prosperous. We were a threat to their ambitions." The deadline for departure was 5 November 1972.

At the outset it was not clear if the cull included Asians who had taken Ugandan citizenship after independence, like the Patels. "We found out a few days later that it did.

"We had given up our right to a British passport in 1962 because Uganda was our home. We knew very little about England.

"After the radio announcement telling us of the eviction, all Ugandan Asians were ordered to go to the Government office with our passports. I was standing in a half-mile long queue. A guard took my passport ripped it up, and told me that I was no longer a Ugandan citizen. I argued but he beat me with a machine gun. I was stateless."

Eventually Patel managed to get an exit visa for England, where he planned to join his mother, two sisters and brother. The date of his departure was 5 November.

Arrival in the UK was a shock. He had emerged from a climate of ethnic hatred into one of economic decline and racial suspicion.

Unemployment was on the rise in early 1970s Britain, and so was resentment of foreigners. Patel remembers it as: "Cold and dark at Stansted Airport. There was no one to meet us. I didn't want to be here at all. Suicide crossed my mind."

The Uganda Resettlement Board reunited Patel with his family at Ham Green Camp, a former US army base near Newbury. "There were 1,200 of us in the camp. I volunteered to help whenever I could. All the time, people were leaving for Bournemouth, Bristol or Southampton. In June 1973 we were given a house in Winterbourne near Bristol. My brother still lives there.

"Our neighbours were very friendly, but there were some problems. I got called a Paki, and told to 'go home'. At Christmas 1975 a brick was thrown through my window. It happened again on New Year's Eve. A few months later I caught the culprit. It never happened again."

²⁴ The total number of ethnic Indians in Uganda in 1972 was 74,000. The majority fled to the UK, Canada, the USA and India. Winder, p380.

During his time at Ham Green, Patel met his future wife. “Her family were resettled in Bournemouth. I visited at weekends, but her father didn’t really approve of me. We are different castes. So we got married at a registry office.”

Patel was determined to be independent, but with no money, no possessions and no formal training to fall back on, he was forced into a sequence of poorly paid jobs²⁵. Over the next five years he worked the nightshift as a press operator for Creda Cookers, as a petrol station attendant for 70p an hour, and as packer at Fry’s Chocolate in Keynsham. By 1978, he had saved enough money to buy a grocery shop in Bristol.

With his entrepreneurial instinct off the leash, success was almost instantaneous. “The Pakistani man we bought the business from had been turning over about £850 per week. Within three months, my wife and I had increased that to £4,000.”

In 1980, Patel speculated on the booming market in two-way radios. “CB was very popular. I travelled around the West Country selling shop to shop. I had about 200 customers. In 1981, I turned over £1 million, which was quite serious money in those days”

When the CB boom died down, Patel diversified into radios, toys, and other electrical goods. Today RJ Wholesale is based in a large retail unit on Stapleton Road in Easton.

Business is steady but declining. “I’m selling goods for the same price I was ten years ago, mainly because of the cost of Chinese imports. We may have to go into retail.”

Now in his late-50s, there may be one career move left for Patel before retirement. But whatever he decides, he would like it involve Mitul, his eldest son. “I want him to take over the business when I retire.”

As he nears the end of his career, Patel has also taken it upon himself to assist younger refugees. During a visit to the shop in September 2005, there were Afghan and Iraqi refugees working as assistants. “I want to help them because I’d been in their position once. But I help them on the condition that they learn English, so I give them time off to go to lessons.”

The approach has worked. In November 2005, an Afghan refugee who had learned English while earning a regular income at RJ Wholesale secured a job as a bus driver.

Patel’s paternalistic streak appears to be driven both by empathy, and an obligation to replicate the respect and status achieved by his family in Uganda. But despite an absence of 33 years, Rasik Patel has never returned.

“I did have a chance in the late-1980s, when the Government changed. I would have gone, but the children were in school, and the recession of the early-1990s hit me hard. I had no choice but to stay.”

²⁵ Patel did at least have the asset of strong English, a legacy of British colonial rule in Uganda.

Nevertheless, Patel would like to die in Uganda. "It is still home to me."

Alfredo Cordal, Mr

Country of origin – Chile
Arrived in the UK – 27 June 1974
Age on arrival – 33

Background

1941 – Born, Santiago, Chile, the youngest of eight children
1960 – Studies at a seminary
1962-63 – Works as a newspaper proof reader by day, and poet by night
1964 – Begins degree in journalism and literature at the Catholic University of Chile
1965 – Wins prestigious poetry prize
1966-1970 – Part time TV literary critic and presenter
1971 – Salvador Allende, leader of the Socialist Party and recently installed as President, appoints Cordal head of public relations for the new Ministry of the Sea
1973 – Allende is overthrown. Cordal flees to Buenos Aires

(Introduction)

During the 1960s, Alfredo Cordal was Chile's answer to Melvyn Bragg. But his support for Salvador Allende's socialist government forced him to flee. Now settled in London, he is a poet and playwright in exile.

(Starts)

Alfredo Cordal's life changed in 1965, when he won the Federación Estudiantes de Chile Prize (FECH) for Poetry, a highly regarded annual award open to students. 'Ode to Clara Estrella,' the successful work, celebrated the strength and solidity of the self-built homes of a Chilean working class community. Cordal was and remains a staunch socialist.

Ability with the written word has long been a revered skill in Chile – Cordal claims that it dates back to 1945, when Gabriela Mistral, another Chilean poet, won the Nobel Prize for Literature. The FECH prize catapulted Cordal to national celebrity.

Within a year, the poet and aspiring broadcast journalist had his own weekly TV show. "I made good use of that award. Back then many television stations were attached to universities, they were at the heart of intellectual life. I approached the channel of the Catholic University of Chile with an idea to interview young writers. They agreed, and I became the channel's literary specialist," says Cordal.

The show was a success. Over the next five years, Cordal became the face of culture on Chilean television. He introduced weekly news programmes, and interviewed literary heavyweights, including Juan Rulfo, Jorge Luis Borges, Julio Cortazar and Pablo Neruda. "I suppose I was a little like Melvyn Bragg," he says.

The 1965 poetry prize, and his raised profile, also brought Cordal to the attention of the Communist Party, which dominated the Federation of Students and much of academic life in Chile.

“The late-1960s was a time of revolutions. Chile was no different. The youth and the poor communities wanted social justice. I was committed to socialism, but I was also a Christian, and believed strongly in a Christian sense of justice.”

Throughout the late-1960s, Cordal was a prominent supporter of Salvador Allende’s socialist party, which came to power in the national elections of 1970.

“Early in 1971 I returned from Madrid, where I had been studying for a postgraduate certificate in journalism and literature. When I got back to Santiago, Allende was in power, and everything had changed. It was a very exciting time.

“Allende was not really a communist. He was the leader of the Socialist Party, the oldest party in Chile. The only aspect of his rule that was perhaps Marxist was his handling of the economy, which was quite radical. He oversaw the redistribution of land, and the nationalisation of all assets, particularly copper, coal and the fisheries.

“Allende wanted independence from the Americans. You must understand that the Americans were a prominent force in the Chilean economy at that time, particularly in the copper trade. Allende promised to limit exports of national assets, and to spread wealth across the country.”

In 1971, to capitalise on his journalistic instincts and media profile, Cordal was made head of public relations for the new Ministry of the Sea. “This was one of Allende’s pet projects. Because Chile has such a long coast, fishing is a major industry. But Allende believed that too much of the fish was being exported. The Ministry of the Sea was set up to redistribute the bounty of the oceans, to feed the masses, and reduce the cost of fish.”

Cordal’s job was to travel up and down the coast, meeting fishermen at the frontline, and promoting the good work of the nationalised fisheries. “It was tough work, but I was happy to do it. I believed in it.”

But by 1973, it was clear that the revolution was in danger. Like many, Cordal believes that the CIA was behind the plot to destabilise Allende. The end came in September.

Allende was overthrown, and died in a September coup led by General Pinochet. Within weeks, Pinochet emerged as the head of a military Junta which embarked on political purges, murdering more than 3,000 supporters of the ousted regime and torturing thousands more. Cordal knew he had to leave.

“Political collaborators were the first to be targeted, then trade union leaders, then journalists. Allende’s closest political collaborators were sent to Dawson Island, a concentration camp. There were similar camps all over the country.”

Within week of the coup, Cordal was tried for subversive activities. “Every day for four months I was questioned about what I knew, where the armaments factories were, what I knew about subversive individuals ...

“I was placed under house arrest. Every night they would call me. My salary was suspended. I was living on my savings and handouts. When I left, I was penniless.”

Cordal's escape was facilitated by the Anglican German Church, which was channeling money to victims of torture and persecution. “They arranged a flight to Buenos Aires for me. I left on 18 February 1974.

“The majority of Chileans went to either Lima or Buenos Aires. When I arrived in Argentina, the United Nations had already set a support service. I was housed in a hostel paid for by the UN, and given medical treatment for stress. I was suffering terrible paranoia, which had built up since before the coup.”

At the beginning of the 1970s, there was no shortage of left-leaning governments sympathetic to the plight of Allende supporters. “Argentina at that time was under the control of Peron. But he was old and frail. Democracy was weak.”

For Cordal, Argentina was only a pit stop. Having recovered his health, he left for England in June 1974.

“I decided on London because I had a nephew studying at the Royal College of Music. The UN paid for my ticket. The plane was full of Chileans. We were met by the Home Office at Heathrow, and received a great deal of support. I received Social Security the next day²⁶.

“I was also lucky to receive English lessons, paid for by the Refugee Council. My English was not good. I could manage, but that was all.

“The Home Office also asked me if I had anywhere to stay. I told them that I would stay with my nephew, who lived off the Kings Road.

“I signed on for about six months, until I found a job. In 1975 I got a job teaching Spanish at a private language school. I found it in the *Guardian*. I didn't have much teaching experience, or any qualifications, but I was never asked for them. I stayed there for ten years.”

In the same year, Cordal was granted Exceptional Leave to Remain for four years²⁷. In quick time, he had established the building blocks for a life in exile.

The 1965 FECH prize may have taken his career in an unexpected direction, but despite the subsequent turmoil, Cordal never stopped writing.

²⁶ In 1973, at the time of the coup, Edward Heath's Conservative government had shown little interest in the plight of Allende supporters. The new Labour Government was much more receptive.

²⁷ In 1979, with Pinochet still in power, Cordal was granted Indefinite Leave to Remain.

Almost as soon as he arrived in the UK, he established links with organisations in the field of migration and refugees. He has read at events arranged by the Medical Foundation²⁸ and Amnesty International, often at memorials for those who disappeared under Pinochet. He has also written for the journal of Chile Democratico, a support agency for displaced Chileans set up in London. Cordal has also become a playwright.

Almost without exception, Cordal's work is inspired by his experience as a refugee, and life in exile. His theatrical debut was 'The Last Judgment', a play first performed at the Finborough Theatre in West London in 1983. It tells the story of Michael Woodward, a wealthy English worker-priest whose father was the director of British-American Tobacco in Chile.

"I met Father Woodward in 1960, when I spent a year at a seminary. He was finishing his theology studies. After graduating, Father Woodward worked in the ship building yards of Valparaiso. He lived among the workers. After the coup he was tortured and disappeared. I have never forgotten him. Father Woodward was an inspiration."

'His only crime
was to preach the good news to the poor,
restore sight to the blind
and freedom to the oppressed

We don't know
if Father Woodward went to Valparaiso to plough the sea
as the father of our independence did,
but we certainly know
that his martyrdom sowed a seed
that now promises liberation for all'

(Excerpt from *Michael Woodward or The Missing Christ*, Alfredo Cordal)

'The Last Judgment' is one of four Alfredo Cordal-penned plays that have been performed at fringe venues in London over the past two years. Others are awaiting production.

Since leaving his full-time job as a language teacher in 1985 Cordal has lived on a combination of revenue from part-time teaching and state benefits. He has never made a living as a play write or a poet, but he remains actively involved with a wide range of fringe theatres, Latin American community groups and refugee support agencies. Today Alfredo Cordal is retired, living in council accommodation in South London.

²⁸ The Medical Foundation provides support to survivors of torture and other forms of organised violence www.torturecare.org.uk

Alfredo Cordal is one of over 3,000 Chileans who settled in the UK between 1973 and 1979. Many well educated, and academically inclined. Among them was Carlos Fortin, a minister in Allende's government, who became head of the Institute of Development Studies in Sussex before his appointment as Deputy Secretary-General of the UN Conference on Trade and Development in Geneva²⁹.

Another was Ester Contreras, a former educational psychologist at Iquique University. With limited knowledge of English she worked her way up from a cleaner to teaching university-level Spanish³⁰.

It has been argued that the Chileans who came to the UK after Pinochet's coup have contributed as much as any other group of 20th century migrants to British intellectual and cultural life. Few would dispute that Cordal has pulled his weight.

Laura Villegas, Ms

Country of origin – Colombia
Arrived in the UK – 11 June 1988
Age on arrival – 42

Background

1946 – Born, Medellín, Colombia
1966 – Began studying law at Medellín University, whilst working part-time as a primary school teacher and lobbying as a left-leaning political activist
1968 – Marries. Stops all work, training, and political activity
1976 – Marriage dissolved
1978 – Recommences law degree, political activism and teaching (art)
1984 – Qualifies as a lawyer, and begins work as a criminal investigator
1985 – Joins Unión Patriótica (UP), a hard-left collective of former guerilla politicians. It was a legal and democratic alternative to the dominant political forces in Colombia, the Conservatives and the Liberals
1986 – Appointed UP's 'Coordinator of the Women's Front' during national elections. UP wins 1.4% of the national vote, enough for it to gain five seats in the Senate and nine in the Chamber of Representatives. The results were unprecedented for a non-mainstream third party
1986 – A campaign of violence against UP politicians and activists begins, carried out by paramilitary groups. By April 1988, Amnesty International estimated that 500 UP members had been killed
June 1988 – Laura Villegas receives a written death threat from MRN, a paramilitary group. It reads: "Death to revolutionaries of the North East. Your hours are numbered." With the assistance of the Medical Foundation (MF)³¹, she left the country three days later – a Colombian in London had alerted MF to Villegas' situation

²⁹ Teichmann, Iris, *Credit to the Nation: Refugee contributions to the UK* (The Refugee Council, 2002) p17

³⁰ Teichman p17

³¹ Founded in 1985, the Medical Foundation for the Care of Victims of Torture provides care and rehabilitation to survivors of torture and other forms of organised violence. In 2004, some 2,588 men, women and children from nearly 100 countries were referred to the Medical Foundation. For further information go to www.torturecare.org.uk

(Introduction)

Laura Villegas' confidence was severely bruised by the process of assimilation. After a long struggle to learn English and rebuild her career, she founded an arts centre to help young migrants make sense of their new lives in London.

(Starts)

Joselito is a Colombian legend. He is the spirit of the Carnival of Barranquilla, held in the Caribbean port every February. On the fourth day of the carnival Joselito is buried, announcing the end of festivities. The cause of death is a mystery.

In 2003 a group of young Colombian migrants at Nueva Generación (New Generation), a centre for Latin American community arts, were asked to imagine how Joselito dies. According to their version of events, he went to London, and died there.

The migrant's ideas formed the basis of 'The Tragic and Surprising Death of Joselito', a play that explored the experience of migration through a prism of magic realist Colombian culture. It is one of countless improvised and traditional events performed by New Generation since April 1997.

New Generation is open very night as a place for young migrants and refugees (aged between 16 and 30) to meet or take part in a wide range of activities – dance, theatre, music, poetry ... The organisation does receive some funding, from the Prince's Trust Foundation, the London Borough of Tower Hamlets and the Community Chest Foundation, among others. But the teachers are all volunteers.

New Generation is a nomadic, self-sustaining organisation. Since July 2005 home has been a community centre in Lambeth that is threatened with demolition. The owner would rather have the building in use, than standing empty, so he doesn't charge rent. Prior to that, New Generation had borrowed rooms at Praxis in East London³², and made use of a crypt under St Mark's Church in Lambeth.

"Over the past seven or eight years more than 400 young people have attended. Initially they came from Colombian and Latin American communities. But today there are also Eastern and Central Europeans, and Africans. It is open to anyone who," says Laura Villegas, a Colombian lawyer turned legal adviser and founder of New Generation.

"It came from an idea I developed when I first arrived [from Colombia], in 1988. I couldn't sleep for the first 25 nights, so I used the time to develop an educational programme, to help children from my country. I thought, these people need help, somewhere to escape from an alien, strange world'," says Villegas. The idea contained the seeds that have flowered in Lambeth.

Villegas was inspired to establish New Generation because of the wasted potential that she had seen in Colombia. "Two months before I left, seven children were murdered by paramilitaries." Another motive was the absence of an arts-based meeting point for Colombians in London.

³² Praxis is a charity that assists new residents to integrate in the UK, 'both to their benefit and that of their new community'. For further information go to www.praxis.org.uk

“When I came to this country I had lost everything. My possessions, my culture, my language ... I turned to the symbolic world of art in which I sought a new way to express myself.” Painting was also refuge, an environment in which she was not required to speak English.

The pressure on Villegas to learn English was immense. When she arrived she knew nobody, aside from a nephew living illegally in the city. Her capacity to earn money was equally limited.

“When I arrived someone told me about a language course at Westminster College. I went for an interview with the course leader, a man who spoke Spanish. But there was no interview, he just looked at me and said, ‘This school is not for you’. He gave no explanation.

“The next day I called my social worker, very upset. She found out that the college thought Latin American women over the age of 40 could not learn English. I was too old.”

Westminster College referred Villegas to a language school in Whitechapel, East London. “It was for people from Bangladesh really,” says Villegas. “I was sent to a class for ladies, where the teacher told us to repeat phrases like, ‘Could I speak to Mr Smith?’ This was no good to me.

“Using my dictionary, I asked the teacher to help us with grammar, to write the language down. She said, there is a grammar course at the school, but it is only for men – the school was for Muslims. I said, ‘I don’t mind’. She said, ‘but the men might’. I went to the classes for two weeks, but the men were not comfortable, so I had to leave.

“Then I heard about another language school, Marble Arch College. It was private, but they accepted refugees on income support. I was only in the elementary class, but at last it was a proper language school.”

Surrounded by younger students, Villegas’ confidence eroded. “The teacher was also quite young. When he saw me and a middle-aged man, a Spanish doctor, he said, ‘Your lives are nearly over, why do you want to learn English?’ His attitude was horrible’.”

For the next two years, Villegas spent her mornings teaching herself English, and her afternoons at Marble Arch College. “I didn’t just want to speak, I wanted to read as well. I wanted to do what I’d done in my country, to help people, to work with my community,” says Villegas.

In 1992, after four years in the country, Villegas signed up for a painting course, one evening a week. At the same time she enrolled on a class two-year course in criminology at Birkbeck College.

“I was good at all the course work, and wrote all my essays, but when the final exams approached I panicked. My brain was empty. I realised that I needed more English.

“I began working as an interpreter for members of my community [Colombians]. I was a very bad interpreter, but the experience increased my confidence, and made me feel

useful. I was helping people with social security, to find out what their rights were, to find solicitors, and schools. I was advising people on legal issues.

A chance meeting at a Colombian restaurant was the next step on the road to independence and self-respect. "By then my nephew was a legal migrant. He had opened two restaurants. One night, over dinner, an acquaintance told me that the migrant support centre where he was working had funding to pay for somebody to be trained as a legal advisor to NVQ level III. He asked me if I would be interested."

After completing the short course, Villegas joined Praxis in Bethnal Green as a volunteer. "My job was to advise new arrivals in education, health, everything."

Soon afterwards, Villegas saw an advert for a legal advisor at the offices of Chile Democratico, an advice centre for Chilean refugees who fled the Pinochet regime in the early 1970s.

"Most of Chileans had returned or been fully assimilated by then. The office was being reformed as IRMO [Indoamerican Refugee and Migrant Organisation³³], to help all South Americans. They wanted someone who spoke Spanish and English, and was also a qualified legal advisor. I was paid a very low salary [around £6,00] as a part-time general advisor, but I was so happy in the work."

In 1999 Villegas became a full-time legal advisor specialising in immigration. She has been with IRMO ever since.

Throughout the long process of integration to life in London, Villegas never stopped painting. "I used it as an escape. From my experience I knew that art and creative expression could also help other migrants.

"Art is a very good way to build up communities. In Colombia I had worked with working class groups, whose children had no schools. They had nothing to do, so I played with them, and learned the potential of painting.

"When I arrived [in England] there was no cultural centre for Colombians. There was only Latin America House in Kilburn [now closed], which was a meeting point. But it was dominated by politics, ideological differences and a commitment to the working class struggle. The majority of people thought that art was elitist and irrelevant. They accused me of being middle class. You know, the countries of Latin America are incredibly different. The language is practically the only thing we have in common.

"It concerned me that so many of the Colombians in England had lost touch with Colombian culture. Most of them were here illegally, so it wasn't a priority. But I wanted to do something.

³³ The Indoamerican Refugee and Migrant Organisation (IRMO) is based at 493 Cambridge Heath Road, Bethnal Green, London E2. T: 020 7729 8833.

“I continued my painting classes until 1997. But I wanted to teach as well. My teacher told me that she thought I was ready, so I asked Praxis if I could use one of their rooms, to get some people together. The original idea was to have a painting class and meeting point for all Latin American people in London.

“New Generation has always been very informal. We have never had many resources. Some weeks plenty of young people came; other weeks nobody. For a long time I was the only painting teacher. Today we are very busy.”

Villegas has only been back to Colombia once since 1988, at the beginning of 2005, when she went to see some friends and family. During the visit, she travelled with a UN inspector to Cali, where it was rumoured that some men had been imprisoned without charge or trial. “I was very lucky that the UN inspector was there, otherwise it would have been too dangerous”

They found one cell full of 20 young men. “The men had not been charged. Maybe they’d been smoking weed. I don’t know. But I took 15 pictures when I was there, and next year [2006] I’m going to mount an exhibition of those photographs in London to help bring justice.”

After a long struggle, Villegas has rebuilt the life she lost when she left Colombia. She now has the linguistic capacity, educational platform and professional confidence to help her fellow Colombians. The difference is that today, the experience is infused by and permeates British and countless other cultures.

To find out more about Nueva Generación, Latin American Experimental Community Arts, go to: www.nuevageneracion.org.uk

Diar Aref, Dr

Country of origin – Iraq
Arrived in the UK – 30 August 2002
Age on arrival – 30

Background

1972 – Born, Baghdad, the eldest of three children
1985 – Enrolled at Baghdad College, an elite secondary school, where he learned English in the same class as two of Saddam Hussein's nephews
1996 – Graduated from Baghdad Medical School, and began two-year medical internship also in Baghdad
1998 – Takes a job as an assistant lecturer in pathology and histology at a university in Kurdistan. As part of his on-going training, Dr Diar Aref was required to practice as a GP for 40 days per year. Much of this time was spent treating victims of torture at Abu Ghraib jail
2002 – Avoids national service, an act of treason under Saddam Hussein. Fearing for his life, Dr Aref pays US\$10,000 to be smuggled out of the country. He spends 12 hours in a wooden box on the back of a truck bound for Syria, before travelling to Istanbul, and then on to England, where he applied for asylum

(Introduction)

Since his arrival in 2002, Dr Diar Aref's priority has been to further his career, which had stalled under the Saddam Hussein regime in Iraq. With the assistance of the Council for Assisting Refugee Academics he has made significant progress.

(Starts)

"I arrived at Heathrow on 30 August 2002, travelling on a forged EU passport. I went straight through immigration control – I was scared that I would be sent back if I applied for asylum at the airport. Instead, I asked an Englishman for help. He gave me directions to the Home Office in Croydon," says Dr Diar Aref, a proud and serious man from a family of medical professionals.

"At the Home Office I joined a long queue. An officer asked for my passport. I told him that I'd flushed it down a toilet. He asked me if I thought that was a sensible thing to do. I didn't know.

"It was late on a Friday afternoon. He gave me a ticket with a number on it, and told me to come back on Monday. Then I went to a co-ordination centre for newly arrived refugees, about ten minutes walk away. From there I was sent to the EuroTower Hotel in Brixton. It was full of asylum seekers, mainly Iraqis and Somalis. I shared a room with an Eritrean. I decided not to speak. I wanted to keep myself to myself. I knew that I would be leaving soon.

"On the Monday, I was given a form to fill out by the IND [Immigration and Nationality Directorate]³⁴, and a quick interview. After that I was sent to another hotel, this time in Sydenham. I stayed for 17 days, during which time I kept in touch with the Home

³⁴ All asylum seekers are required to fill out an Application Registration Form by IND.

Office. They gave me the number of a solicitor³⁵. They also told me about the dispersal system, and the National Asylum Support Service [NASS].

"I was asked where I'd like to go. I said Leeds, Sheffield or Cardiff, because I had friends there. I was actually sent to Doncaster, because they said it was in between Leeds and Sheffield. I'd never heard of Doncaster.

"I looked on a map and saw that it was near a place called Bentley. I sent an e-mail to a friend telling him I'd been dispersed to the place where Rolls Royce make Bentleys. Only later did I realise that there are lots of places called Bentley in England.

"I left for Doncaster on 19 September, and stayed at a NASS hotel owned by a Hungarian refugee. This was where I waited for my decision. There were about 30 asylum seekers at the hotel. Probably 20 of them were Kurds. I was the only Iraqi with a formal education.

"During that period I studied for the IELTS [International English Language Testing System]. I needed this qualification in order to practice as a doctor. My friends who had been dispersed to large towns, where there are schools and teachers with experience, all passed IELTS easily. But there were no schools with experience in Doncaster, so I taught myself. I passed second time around, in March 2003, but not with a very good mark.

"By then I had also been granted Indefinite Leave to Remain [ILR]. My solicitor called on 12 February 2003. It was about three weeks before the war began. I had been really lucky."

Once asylum seekers have been granted ILR, they are entitled to the same benefits as a British citizen. In April 2003, Dr Aref moved into a flat paid for by housing benefit. He stayed for nearly 20 months. "Doncaster was not perfect, but I wanted a base until I finished my exams."

For Dr Aref, the most important turning point during his time in the UK was making contact with the Council for Assisting Refugee Academics (CARA). "A friend of mine, an Iraqi doctor based in London, told me about them. I called in January [2004]. They said that they would get back to me. Five months later they did."

CARA was formed in 1933, to help Jews and other victims of the Nazi purge of universities. The formation of what was then called the Academic Assistance Council was kick-started by a highly charged meeting at the Royal Albert Hall, addressed by Albert Einstein among others. Since 1933, CARA has assisted 18 Nobel prize winners, 71 fellows of the Royal Society, and 50 fellows of the British Academy. Today, CARA helps teachers and academics to continue their studies and/or careers in the UK³⁶.

³⁵ Duncan Lewis Solicitors in Dalston, East London.

³⁶ CARA runs a limited grants programme, and an information and advice service. CARA's Allocation Committee meets twice a year and takes all decisions related to grants. Staff provide support and advice to refugees throughout the application process and throughout the life of their grant. For applicants who do not meet CARA's grant criteria, staff can provide information packs on higher education and employment in the UK. CARA also publishes a guide to higher education for refugees and asylum seekers. For further information go to www.academic-refugees.org

“By the time I met John Akker [executive secretary of CARA] I had passed IELTS. I now needed to pass two further exams before I could start looking for work, PLAB 1, and PLAB 2, theoretical and practical language courses³⁷. Overseas doctors hoping to practice in the UK must pass both. He asked me where I was studying for the exams, and where I was living. He was quite shocked when I told him about Doncaster.

“John was great. He showed a real understanding of my situation, and was really supportive. He said that they would cover the costs and expenses for all my exams, even IELTS retrospectively. Three weeks after the meeting a cheque for £600 arrived.”

By the end of 2004, Dr Aref had all the qualifications he needed to practice as a general practitioner doctor. “So I began applying for jobs. I want to become a pathologist, but that will take time. In the first instance I knew that I needed to gain some experience of the NHS, so I did a series of clinical attachments [unpaid training].”

The first, in December 2003, was a two-month spell working with an Iraqi surgeon in Doncaster. “He was my former university lecturer. I’d met him some months before. He had left Iraq in 1994. It is a very small world.” This was followed by four months in the pathology unit at Warrington Hospital.

Throughout this period, Dr Diar was surviving on income support. He supplemented this income working part-time as an Arabic translator. “The authorities knew all about it. It was legal.

“It was very tough to get a job. There really is a lot of competition – there were already three Iraqi house officers at Warrington.

“But I don’t think the difficulties I have experienced in getting a job are do to with prejudice, at least I didn’t experience it. Even if that had been the case, I would have understood. Anyway, I was not alone. There are so many doctors trying to get work.”

Eventually a clinical attachment position came up at the Essex Rivers Healthcare Trust in Colchester. This led to a six-month contract for a Senior House Officer, which was renewed for a further six months in August 2005³⁸.

“Colchester is a much better than Doncaster. It is more civilised, more developed and close to London. But I don’t think that I have adapted to British life or British culture any more since I’ve been here. When I was in Doncaster I survived independently. And I’ve survived independently here. I haven’t got English friends. My colleagues are very kind, but we don’t socialise. Most of them have families, and live outside of the town. I am single and live in a room at the hospital.

³⁷ PLAB is the acronym for Professional and Linguistic Assessment Board. Passing PLAB 1 and PLAB 2 makes an overseas doctor eligible for registration with the General Medical Council.

³⁸ Dr Aref was interviewed for this report in September 2005. The second of his six-month contracts expired in February 2006.

“I do have friends, but they are mainly Iraqi – there are seven or eight Iraqi doctors in Colchester. I also travel to London quite often. There is a large Iraqi population there, particularly in Ealing.

“In every respect, life in Baghdad and Colchester are completely different, culturally, religiously ... That is probably why I find it difficult to engage with life here. And anyway, my career is my priority for now.

“But I have absolutely no regrets about my decision to leave Iraq. Watching the television every night, I know how lucky I am.”

Conclusions

It will not come as a surprise to read that upon arrival in the UK, asylum seekers are generally traumatised, distressed and disorientated – every asylum seeker and refugee spoken to in the compilation of this document could remember the exact date of their arrival.

Having navigated the Home Office system, refugees are often engaged in a fight for survival. During this period they might seek sanctuary among friends, family or with members of their native communities.

But as the experiences of Rasik Patel, Alfredo Cordal and Laura Villegas indicate, after overcoming the shock of arrival, refugees typically go through a period of rebuilding, during which they seek to make sense of what has happened to them.

The final phase in the life of the long-term exile might be described as acting as a magnet for cultural exchange and support. It is during this stage that many refugees are inclined to invest time and effort in assisting other refugees to assimilate.

However, as the experience of Dr Diar Aref (arrived 2002) demonstrates, British policy on asylum and refugees is changing, with significant implications for the creation of conditions to accelerate their social and economic productivity in Britain.

There is little doubt Government's on going bid to speed up and streamline the asylum process – kick-started by the Immigration and Asylum Act 1999 – has had significant implications for asylum seekers and refugees seeking to establish new lives in Britain.

The number of migrants coming into the UK has reduced substantially, a consequence of efforts to discourage asylum applications, There has also been a corresponding fall in the number of successful asylum applications.

Perhaps most significantly, the 1999 Act introduced dispersal, since when asylum seekers waiting for their application to be processed have been dispersed to 71 locations outside London and the South-East of England

Dispersal has required towns and cities, many with very limited experience of ethnic diversity, to develop systems to assist asylum seekers and refugees to settle into full and productive lives in the UK. The outcomes, perhaps unsurprisingly have been mixed.

However, after an initial period of turmoil, some clear principles have emerged, notably the recognition that in order for asylum seekers and refugees to be able to give an accurate account of themselves, and make best use of their assets, every effort must be invested in their emotional and physical well being.

Recent experience, backed up by Government policy suggests that developing mentoring schemes to facilitate one-to-one contact between migrants and volunteers is important in this regard. Other factors include open and trusting relationships with the leaders of migrant communities; fast, fair legal support; and encouraging migrants to volunteer, to build confidence and language skills.

It is also widely acknowledged that employment offers a fast track to independence and self-esteem. The placement of children in schools is another strong root in a community.

Looking beyond dispersal to the broader picture of assisting refugees to settle in Britain, some general principles hold true. One is that, armed with an instinctive understanding on British culture and schooled in the language, second generation refugees are often well placed to benefit from the social and economic platforms established by their parents.

It is also the case that the longer an asylum seeker or refugee has been in the UK, the more likely they are to reach out to other cultures.

Finally, it should not be forgotten that the extent of an individual's willingness to operate interculturally is at least partially driven by need. For instance, if intercultural interaction is a prerequisite to developing professional ties, an individual is more likely to build bridges between cultures. The reverse is also true.

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Appendix

Current asylum legislation

Britain's legislative commitments

The UK is a signatory to the 1951 United Nations Convention relating to the Status of Refugees. This requires that every application for asylum be considered on its merits by trained caseworkers, to determine whether the applicant can demonstrate a well-founded fear of persecution in his or her home country for one of the reasons listed in the Convention. These reasons include, race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion.

The UK is also a signatory to the Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms, commonly referred to as the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR). This precludes the removal of people in certain circumstances, in particular where removal would expose the individual to a risk of torture, degrading treatment or other punishment.

The process

The asylum process begins at either the port of entry, or the Immigration and Nationality Directorate (IND) in London. Applicants are obliged to make themselves known to the authorities as soon as possible. They are then 'screened' to establish their identity and nationality, with interpreters present if necessary.

Increasing numbers of asylum applicants then go through an induction, where they are told about their rights and responsibilities. Claimants also receive an Application Registration Card (ARC), which gives them access to limited services. During these initial stages, asylum seekers are housed in basic accommodation, typically a hostel, B&B or cheap hotel.

Since 2000, asylum seekers who are unable to support themselves have been eligible to apply for help from the National Asylum Support Service³⁹. NASS provides subsistence payments and accommodation on a no-choice basis in parts of the UK where there is less pressure on housing than in London and the South East.

The Government has identified 71 areas around the country where asylum seekers are to be sent – these areas are described as 'clusters' (see page six). The aspiration is for 0.5%, or one in 200, of the population in each cluster to be asylum seekers.

NASS has contracts with housing providers in each of the cluster areas. The private providers are paid according to the number of asylum seekers housed, not according to the value of the property. As a consequence they tend to provide cheap properties in undesirable pockets of deprived areas.

Once housed, applicants must remain at the stated address unless told otherwise by the IND, the body responsible for processing all claims for asylum.

³⁹ NASS was introduced under the 1999 Immigration and Asylum Act.

Applicants typically wait for about two weeks before receiving a date for the Home Office interview. The majority take place at IND centres in Liverpool and Croydon, or at 'fast track' centres in Oakington, Harmondsworth and Yarl's Wood.

At the interview, applicants are invited to produce a statement of evidence, stating their case for asylum. There is no obligation for legal representation at this stage, although Refugee Action, a charity that assists refugees to build new lives in the UK, does recommend it.

Decisions

Assessments are based on the details given at interview, and sometimes in writing via a Statement of Evidence form, which must be completed in English. A caseworker or immigration officer trained under the 1951 Convention decides the claim. All applicants are notified of the decision by post.

If an asylum seeker is recognised as a refugee, they are granted indefinite leave to enter or remain in the UK. From that point they must move out of temporary accommodation, and are entitled to the same social and economic rights as British citizens. They can also apply for a 1951 Convention travel document, and for family reunion.

If the asylum applicant does not qualify for asylum, but has been able to demonstrate a need for protection in the UK, they may be granted Humanitarian Protection (HP) or Discretionary Leave (DL).

HP and DL replaced their predecessor Exceptional Leave to Remain in April 2003. The Home Office says that: "[The new categories] will be used more sparingly than exceptional leave was".

Humanitarian Protection is a grant of limited leave. Discretionary Leave is open to applicants who cannot demonstrate a need for protection under either the asylum or Humanitarian Protection, but it is only granted for a defined number of reasons⁴⁰.

Appeals

Under the Human Rights Act, all asylum seekers are entitled to a fair hearing of their application. In practice, this means that if they are initially refused they may have the right to appeal at an independent tribunal to a legally qualified adjudicator.

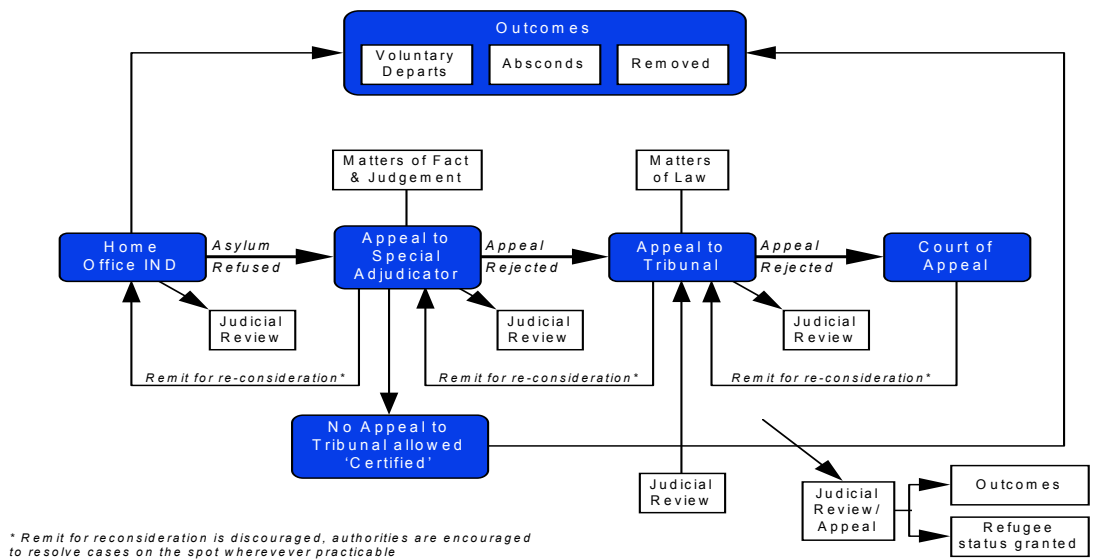
If a failed asylum seeker has a right to appeal it will first be heard by a Tribunal. If the Tribunal dismisses the appeal, the Court of Appeal is the next level of appeal for the asylum seeker. However, very few appeals reach this level. If an appeal is not launched within the permitted time, applicants lose their right to appeal altogether.

⁴⁰ For a full explanation of reasons, go to, www.ind.homeoffice.gov.uk/ind/en/home/laws_policy/policy_instructions/apis/discretionary_leave.html

Asylum seekers may stay after their initial refusal because they are: awaiting appeal to Tribunal; awaiting appeal to the Court of Appeal or a Judicial Hearing; their health prevents them from travelling; there is no safe passage of return to their country of origin; their home country is not regarded as safe; difficulty in obtaining passport/travel documents; their home country will not accept them without travel documents; or immigration rules allow them to stay for another reason.

Asylum seekers who are refused refugee status, and who have no other basis to stay, are expected to leave the UK. If they do not do so they may be detained, pending 'removal'.

The asylum appeals process



Source: The Immigration service

New Asylum Model

In March 2005 the Government began to implement the New Asylum Model (NAM), another means of speeding up the asylum process and removing failed applicants quickly. As originally envisaged, the NAM grades asylum applicants into nine 'segments', according to the strength of their claim.

The IND web site explains: "The aim is to recognise readily those with well-founded claims, to maximise deterrents against unfounded applications, and to ensure that a higher percentage of asylum seekers whose claims fail, are quickly removed from the UK. This in turn will lead to a more efficient system including reduced support costs." By autumn 2005, only two of the segments had been defined

Assuming that the NAM evolves as expected, applicants' claims will be categorised at

the start of the screening process. The claimant will then be allocated a specialist 'case owner' who will manage the claimant and all aspects of the claim through the appropriate segment and route.

That case owner will have face to face contact with the claimant on a regular basis and will be responsible for all aspects of the claim, including any support until either integration or removal takes place.

If the claimant decides at any point that they wish to return home they will be encouraged to do so and will be helped to access the Voluntary Returns Scheme.

Facts and figures

- The UK is tough on asylum seekers, particularly from certain parts of the world. Only 19% of Afghans and 3% of Colombians were granted asylum in 2001. Over the same period, Canada accepted 97% of Afghans and 85% of Colombians.⁴¹
 - In 2003, the Immigration and Nationality Directorate (IND) made 64,940 initial decisions on asylum applications in 2003. Initial decisions may be re-considered for a number of reasons. If reconsiderations are included, then IND made 68,245 decisions in 2003.
 - Of these, IND recognised 6% of asylum seekers as refugees and granted them asylum (3,865 applicants)
 - Exceptional Leave to Remain (ELR) was granted to a further 6% (3,975)*
 - Humanitarian Protection (HP) or Discretionary Leave (DL) was granted to 5% (3,235)*
 - 83% of applications (53,865) were refused
 - The number of applications for asylum in the UK fell by 31% in 2004 to 33,960
 - Including dependants, the total number of applications for asylum in 2004 was 40,625, 32% less than the 60,045 applications made in 2003
 - 46,020 'initial decisions' were made in 2004, significantly higher than the number of applications
 - This meant that the number of cases awaiting initial decision has fallen by 60% to 9,700, compared to 23,900 at the end of 2003, and the lowest level for a decade
 - 55,975 appeals were determined by adjudicators in 2004, 32% lower than in 2003 (81,725)
 - The proportion of appeals dismissed remained at 78% in 2004 whilst the proportion of appeals allowed fell to 19%, from 20% in 2003
 - 12,585 failed asylum applicants were removed from the UK in 2004, 3% less than in 2003 (13,005)
 - Including dependants, 14,905 failed asylum seekers were removed in 2004, 17% less than in 2003 (17,895)
 - The individuals with the largest numbers of principal applicants who were removed or departed voluntarily in the second quarter of 2005 were from Serbia and Montenegro, Afghanistan, Iraq, Iran and Albania
- (* HP & DL replaced ELR on 1 April 2003)

⁴¹ . Source: www.asylumaid.org.uk/AA%20pages/appeals.htm

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