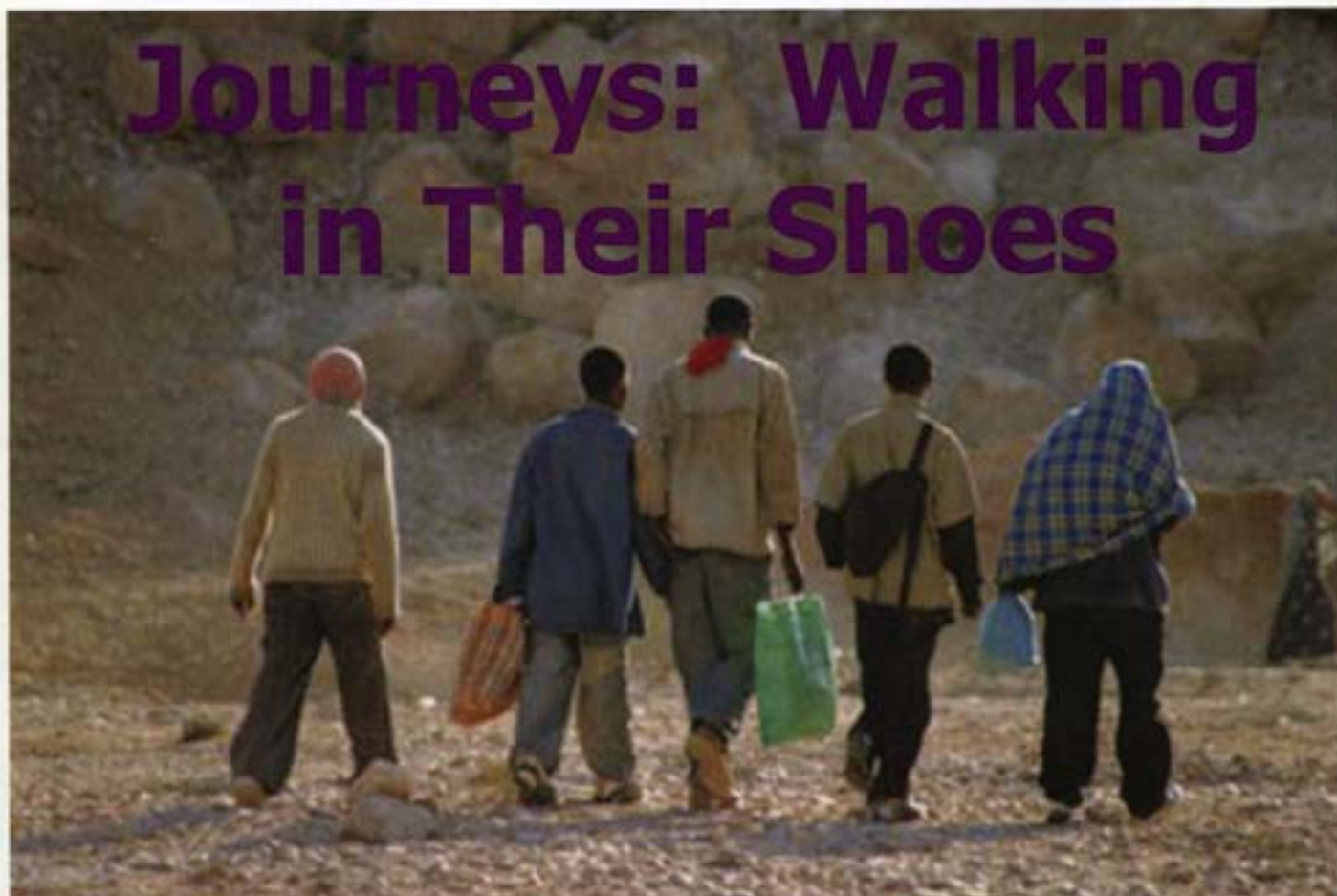


Journeys: Walking in Their Shoes



**Case Studies of Asylum Seekers and Refugees
in Hastings and St Leonards**



**HASTINGS
TRUST**

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Introduction

To many people, *asylum seekers* and *refugees* are one and the same, and they in turn are the same as *illegal immigrants* and *economic migrants* – in short, people who are 'swamping' our small country, taking our jobs and houses, living on our benefit system, destroying our culture...

This type of prejudice, largely fuelled by the tabloid press and endorsed by politicians anxious to get the popular vote at election time, is not only damaging to harmonious race relations but is also based on inaccurate and confused information.

The Community Regeneration Unit (CRU) works to support refugees and asylum seekers in Hastings and St Leonards, to provide social support, a listening ear, to help individuals become involved in local decision making and to empower communities.

One way this support works is through a weekly drop-in for asylum seekers and refugees which the CRU facilitated with Pulse/Youth Development Service. Through conversations with attendees the CRU identified a desire to counteract these negative stereotypes and lack of knowledge about asylum seekers and refugees, the legal system for claiming asylum and the rights and responsibilities of asylum seekers and refugees. The attendees were really unhappy that people made assumptions about their situations and did not know how or why they had been forced to flee their countries, often having to leave loved ones behind.

This report attempts to redress the balance by putting forward case histories of people in Hastings and St Leonards who have fled their countries of origin and their reasons for doing so, as well as providing background information on the countries they fled from and their life since arriving in the UK.

Acknowledgements

The CRU would like to thank everyone who participated in this research, sharing with us their experiences and providing us with an insight into their lives. We can't thank them by name but they know who they are.

The picture on the front cover is taken from the UNHCR United Nations Refugee Agency Website ©UNHCR/K.McKinsey/February 2006

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Methodology

The CRU was interested in collecting qualitative data, the human interest element was more important than trying to collect quantitative data. It was judged that because of the nature of the research, a small sample of interviewees would be sufficient, if possible from a representative cross-section of nationalities which reflects the make-up of the asylum seeker/refugee populations in Hastings at this time (2006).

Through links built up by the CRU with the asylum seeker and refugee communities, the researcher contacted individuals identified as possible contributors and produced multi-lingual publicity (appropriate languages included French, Arabic, Kurdish etc) to ask for contributors. Some individuals felt unable/unwilling to contribute to the research. This was because although all case studies were to be published anonymously, because of the small geographical area, many individuals felt that they potentially could be identified from their stories. Others felt that they did not want to put their families, who may still be in the countries being described, at risk.

The researcher conducted in-depth interviews over a period of three months in early 2006, employing interpreters when needed. The information was then typed up and a copy given to the contributor to verify the information. The researcher studied extensive background information on the countries concerned to give a context to the stories.

The Researcher

The interviews, research and writing for this project were carried out on a voluntary basis by Jacqueline Armstrong, who has extensive experience of working with asylum seekers and refugees and of researching background information about their countries of origin, having spent four years as a legal immigration caseworker locally. She has also been an author of educational reference books for over 30 years, writing under the name of Jacqueline Dineen.

She began her career as an editor with an educational publisher in London, later becoming a freelancer and beginning to write her own books. She now has around 100 titles to her name, published by a variety of publishing houses including Oxford University Press, Cambridge University Press, Heinemann Educational, Macmillan, Hodder and Stoughton. She has written on many topics, with ancient civilisations and world religions being particular specialities.

Variety being the spice of life, Jacqueline now combines her writing with running a gallery and picture framers in Hastings with her husband, Peter.

Definition of Terms

First, it might be helpful to clear up some general misconceptions about what asylum seekers and refugees actually are and where they fit into the general immigration picture.

Asylum seeker: Someone who is fleeing persecution in their homeland, has arrived in another country, made themselves known to the authorities and exercised their legal right to apply for asylum.

Refugee: Someone whose asylum application has been successful and who is allowed to stay in another country having proved they would face persecution back home.

Failed asylum seeker: Someone whose asylum application has been turned down and is awaiting return to their country. If it is not safe for refused asylum seekers to return to their country of origin, they may have to stay for the time being.

Illegal immigrant: Someone who has arrived in another country, intentionally not made themselves known to the authorities and has no legal basis for being there.

Economic migrant: Someone who has moved to another country to work and has the right to do so.

(Source: Refugee Council – Tell it like it is: The Truth about Asylum)

Case Studies

Cameroon, Africa

I got involved in politics in my country and things went wrong on Election Day in 2002. I was the Secretary of a small branch of the Social Democratic Front (SDF), which was an opposition party. The ruling party was the *Rassemblement Démocratique du Peuple Camerounais* (RDPC) - they have been in power for many years and still are today. In 2002, I was chosen by my party to be an election monitor at a polling station. I had to make sure that everything was OK and that the votes were properly counted and there was no vote-rigging. I caught someone trying to vote twice under different identities. The person came to vote in the morning and again in the afternoon. When I saw him in the afternoon, I caught him and reported him to a security guard, who called the police. The police arrived and asked me to tell them what had happened. I was critical of irregularities in the way the election was being conducted. I was representing my party and could not leave then, so the police asked me to come to the police station when the election had finished.

The election finished at 9.30pm. I reported the incident to my party and went to the police station. The police asked me again what had happened and what I had seen. I tried to tell them what I had found but they only took notes about me - my name and address and other details - instead of about the incident at the polling station. I left the police station at about 10.30pm and went to my mum's house, where I lived at the time.

At about 11.30pm, three unknown men came to my mum's house looking for me. I was in my room at the time and my mum was reluctant to tell them where I was. They threatened to kill her if she did not tell them. They began to search the house, broke down the door to my room, blindfolded me and took me out. My mum was crying and asking what they were doing with her son. My wife, who was also there, was crying too. The men said they were going to kill me because I was a dangerous element for the ruling party. They refused to say where they were taking me. Then they took me out to their car, still blindfolded, and we drove for hours. When we stopped, they took me out of the car and put me into a prison cell - I didn't know where I was. They questioned me, asking how I could be critical about the election. They said that my criticisms were dangerous for the ruling party and that I had no chance of survival.

They kept me in prison for two years, during which time I was ill-treated and tortured. They beat me every day with an iron bar and I still have scars from those beatings. I was in a cell with other people and one of my cell mates tried to rape me. I was only given food every two days and I was made to do hard manual work.

The prison guards were very strict and when I had been there for 1½ years they began to feel confident that I couldn't ever escape. One day in April 2004, I was asked to carry some stone from one place to another. I realised that the guard was not paying attention to me and so I managed to escape and run away. I ran miles and then I realised that I was in the south of the country. A minibus driver stopped and gave me a lift to my home village, where I went into hiding. I was ill from my treatment but I couldn't go to hospital because I was afraid the police would find me and send me back to prison. I asked someone to let my mother and my wife know that I was in the village. They both came to see me, and my mum said that the police had been to the house looking for me. When she saw the condition I was in, she said that I couldn't stay there any more. She arranged for me to leave Cameroon. I left on 16th June 2004 and flew to the UK, arriving at Heathrow on 17th June.

When I arrived in the UK, I claimed asylum at the airport. I was suffering mentally and physically. After I had been interviewed at Heathrow, I was sent to Oakington Reception Centre in Cambridgeshire, where I spent seven days. I was referred to the Medical Foundation for the Victims of Torture for a report on my condition, to check my story.

When I left Oakington, I was sent to a hotel in London where I stayed for three weeks. I was then sent to the Adelphi Hotel in St Leonards. My case was heard fairly quickly because the Medical Foundation report showed that I was telling the truth. I was granted refugee status by the Home Office in November 2004.

While I was waiting for my case to be decided, I studied English at Hastings College. I am now trying to get a job but I am finding it difficult to connect with the English system. In Cameroon, I was working for the Shell Company. I started as a petrol pump attendant and was a deputy manager by the time my problems began. I have filled in job applications in the UK but I am still waiting to hear if any of them have been successful. I want to join the police force but I have to be in the UK for three years before I can do that. I am studying for the European Computer Driving Licence (ECDL) with Learn Direct. I want to do a B.Tech in Public Services but I cannot afford the course at the moment. I have been trying to get help with the payment but so far without success. I have also been doing an interpreting course in French.

When I first left Cameroon, my mum was threatened by the police but this harassment stopped once I had been granted refugee status. My wife is not living there any more; she has moved to another town so she has not had any problems. She is studying at university and when she has completed her course, I will apply for her to join me here.

Democratic Republic of the Congo, Africa

There has been civil war in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) since 1997, the result of ongoing political dictatorship which has created a politically unstable situation.

I am a Tutsi, and not even 1% of the population of the DRC are Tutsis. The largest ethnic group is Bantu. The genocide in Rwanda in 1994, when thousands of Tutsis were killed, sparked off the situation in the DRC, setting the Bantus against the Tutsis. In 1998, there was a mass deportation of Tutsis from the DRC because the Congo Tutsis were considered to be no different from Rwandan Tutsis. So the genocide moved to the DRC. Tutsis were killed and 400,000 were deported to Rwanda. All the villages where Tutsis lived, in the east of the DRC, were affected.

I came from this area but I was not deported because I was not in the country at the time. I had been working in Rwanda, Burundi and the DRC on a Redevelopment Programme for the United Nations. I had gone to Rwanda in 1995, working for an Italian corporation who were carrying out humanitarian action to support survivors of the genocide and help them to rebuild their lives. From there, I moved to the United Nations project which had similar aims and was setting up loans to help people get back to the situation they had been in before the genocide. My role was to form an association to administer these loans and to work together with about 20 other associations to help people to rebuild their lives.

I then worked for the Swiss Embassy, negotiating host families for orphans and finding people who were prepared to support orphans as part of a partnership. I was based in Rwanda but I covered the different areas affected by the genocide. In the DRC and Burundi, my role included helping children who had been forced to become soldiers, to get them out of this and find host families for them, as many of these child soldiers were also orphans.

The situation became particularly dangerous for me because I was a Tutsi. Although I had not been deported from the DRC, I could not return there after the mass killings and deportations began. The government forces and militias who used child soldiers were convinced they were doing these children good and they were against me for taking the children away from this life. As a result, I was arrested in the DRC when I went back there as part of this work. I was in prison for three days, after which I managed to escape by bribing the guards.

Amnesty International and other NGOs I had come into contact with in my work arranged for me to leave the DRC and come to the UK. I would like to have stayed working in Rwanda but the situation with the child soldiers was challenging as I was writing reports about bad practices in the three countries, the DRC, Rwanda and Burundi. I was told that the fact I had had problems in one of these countries meant that it was not safe for me to work in the others either, and that it would be best for me to leave Africa. The NGOs made the travel arrangements for me and advised me to claim asylum when I arrived in the UK.

I arrived in the UK in May 2000 and claimed asylum. My application was refused by the Home Office and so I appealed against this decision. My appeal was dismissed by the Immigration Appellate Authority and I had lodged an appeal with the Immigration Appeal Tribunal when the Home Office changed its mind. I think the reason may have been that there were a lot of points I could take issue with in the Adjudicator's Determination following my first appeal. I also had a lot of evidence, such as letters from Amnesty International and others; I also had a website and my case had been reported in the Press, so I had plenty of back-up. I was lucky to have friends and colleagues to support me, and the result was that I was granted refugee status by the Home Office. After I had had Indefinite Leave to Remain in the UK for a year and had been here for five years in total, I applied for and was granted British citizenship.

Guinea, West Africa

I come from Conakry, the capital of Guinea, and I was a student at college there before I left the country. I lived in Conakry with my mother, my sisters and my brother. The students used to support their favourite politicians and many of us, including me, supported Sidya Touré who was in opposition but had been the Prime Minister a few years earlier. He did a lot for the country when he was Prime Minister and people were very happy with him. Before he came to power, no one cared about the poor people, but he helped them. People did not have electricity before but he organised an electricity supply and also improved the water supply. University students had found it very difficult to find jobs after completing their studies. There was no place for young people because older people kept all the jobs. Students asked themselves why they were bothering to study if there was no future for them afterwards. Sidya Touré changed all that by retiring the older people to make way for younger ones.

The government did not like this because Sidya Touré was changing things and he was very popular. President Conté, who had ruled Guinea for about 20 years, stopped him being Prime Minister and he became an opposition minister. During the elections in 2003, we supported Touré but Conté got in again because it was a corrupt election. The following year, Touré was arrested.

I was leader of the students in my area. When Sidya Touré didn't get in, students from different areas came to Conakry to demonstrate against the unfair election results. The police smashed up the demonstration by spraying hot water over the students and beating them up. Some people were killed; others had their arms or legs broken. I was beaten up – I still have the scars. The police were after the student leaders from the different areas.

Then the police came to my house. They knocked on the door and my Mum asked who was there. They said it was the police and she asked them what they wanted. They told her to open the door as they wanted to ask her something. When she opened the door, they pushed past her into the house. I was in my room and I heard her screaming that the police were looking for me.

I escaped through the window and went to our neighbours' house. I asked them to hide me but they said they couldn't do that because it would be too dangerous as the police would arrest them and maybe kill them. But they said they knew a white man who might be able to help me. They took to see this man, whose name was Jacques, and explained my situation to him. At first, Jacques refused to help me, saying it was too dangerous. Then, as a favour to his neighbours, he agreed to hide me and help me to leave the country.

Jacques had to travel to Senegal and he took me with him, hidden in his car. In Senegal, we stayed in a hotel for two or three days while Jacques sorted out travel documents for me to travel to the UK. While we were there, I saw a newspaper article about the demonstration in Conakry, with a photograph of me as a student leader. I was really scared when I saw that but Jacques told me not to worry as I would soon be on my way to the UK. I asked if I could take the newspaper with me but he told me not to bother as I would have the chance to explain everything to the authorities in the UK. He took me to the airport and told me that I would fly to Lisbon in Portugal and then to London. He said that when I arrived in London, I should go to the police, show them the passport he had given me and explain my story.

I flew to Lisbon, where I changed planes. People at the airport showed me where to go. When I arrived at Heathrow, I gave my passport to an Immigration Officer who told me to go with him. He took me to a different area of the airport and told me to take a seat and wait. I was scared because I could not speak English, only French, and I didn't know anything about the country or its laws.

After I had been waiting there for two or three hours, the immigration people came to me and said that I was going for an interview. I asked what interview and they told me that it was to explain my story. The interpreter didn't speak French very well; I know this because later on, when I had studied English, I read the interview notes they had given me and they were not accurate. I was fingerprinted and given a body check, and then I was put on a bus and taken to Oakington Detention Centre in Cambridgeshire. I was scared because I didn't know what was going to happen to me.

I had another interview at Oakington but they didn't believe my story and refused my asylum claim. After I had been there for seven days, they came and told me to get my things together as I was leaving Oakington. I asked where I was going and they said they didn't know. I wondered if they would kill me and I was very frightened.

An officer came to release me and said that I would be given somewhere temporary to live. They gave me a train ticket to Hastings and told me that people who worked at the stations wore yellow jackets and that I should ask one of them to help me. When I got to London Victoria, I asked someone in a yellow coat to help me find the Hastings train. I had been given the telephone number of a hotel and when I got off the train, I phoned them. They said they would come and pick me up but I waited for an hour and no one came. I had the address of the hotel so I asked someone how to get there and walked to it. At the hotel, I was given some food and then taken to where I was to live.

I telephoned Jacques to ask if everything was all right and he told me that my family – my mother, two sisters and brother – had been arrested because the police could not find me. He said that the authorities would not release my family until they had got me. He later told me that my Mum was dead but he didn't know what had happened to my sisters and brother. He left Guinea shortly after that and so I didn't get any more news from him. I have tried to find out what has happened to my sisters and brother and whether they are still alive, but without success.

I had to go and sign at the police station every month but then I was ill for quite a while and so I could not go to the police station to sign. One day, I got a letter saying that I had to leave the hotel. I had nowhere to go so I went to stay with a friend. I slept on the floor and my friend gave me food as I had no money. Then I was arrested and taken to Dover where I was detained for two months. I went to Court to apply for bail twice but this was not granted because I had not been to sign at the police station and so they thought I was unreliable. I explained that I had been ill but they didn't believe me. They sent me to Harmondsworth and applied to my country's Embassy in London to get documents to return me to Guinea. I went for an interview at the Embassy and was then taken back to Harmondsworth. They were going to take me back to Dover but then I found out that bail had been paid for me and I was released. I was given a train ticket back to Hastings but I had to give an address where I would be staying and I now have to sign at the police station every week. I am trying to reopen my case because I don't feel that I have been properly represented and I am afraid about what would happen to me if I am sent back to Guinea. I have lost my family and I have no one there any more.

Iran (1)

I left Iran because I could not agree with the regime there and the way everything is governed by the Islamic religion and the mullahs. If you do not take a moderate line and conform, you cannot have a life in Iran. There is no freedom of thought or opinion and you always have problems with your family and with the authorities.

In Iran, you are expected to live with your family and accept only one religion, Islam. If your family agree with the Islamic regime and you do not, this leads to constant arguments involving shouting, insults and sometimes whipping. I could not accept the Iranian concept of Islam because it made no sense to me and so I had many arguments with people, including my family, university tutors and mullahs. Iran is the only country that has only Shia Muslims and even Sunni Muslims are not acceptable there, though the people say that Sunnis are their brothers. The imams and mullahs say they rule everything and that Shia Muslims follow the only true religion. They have absolutely no tolerance for any other religions, which presumably means that only Shias go to heaven while everyone else goes to hell – this is the type of thing I cannot accept. They say that Europeans are privileged people who lead decadent lives and follow bad religions. They consider that other countries are their enemies and say nothing good about them, but they never say that Iran has problems which need to be solved. This is what the religious leaders preach and the people who support Islam also think this. Everyone is brainwashed from childhood and at school, everyone is saying, 'Down with America/England/Israel' etc. A lot of students, including myself, are against this regime once they are old enough to think about it for themselves. They do not like the present government but they cannot do anything about it.

People who are religious give one-fifth of their income to the mullahs, believing that this will guarantee them a place in heaven, even if they often obtained this money by corruption, thieving or other dishonest means. But no one thinks that this matters. . There is a lot of corruption in Iran, even though it calls itself a Muslim country. Most of the mullahs are Arabs but many Iranians are Persian. These Arab mullahs don't care about the people, only about religion.

Another problem is that in my country, it seems that it is a crime to be young. Anyone who is aged between 17 and about 30 has problems. The religious police (the Baseej) always go to young people first, to interrogate and arrest them, if there is any trouble. The Baseej are under the control of the religious leader of the country, Ayatollah Khomeini. Some members of the Baseej are as young as 15 or 16. They have guns and they can do what they want, insulting and arresting people for no reason. People who join the Baseej may be doing it because of poverty or to give themselves better opportunities. They can get shortened military service, help with finding work and other opportunities through the Baseej, but they also have to do what the Baseej tell them to.

I recently read in the newspapers about an incident of the sort that is happening all the time. There was a demonstration in Tehran about getting better rights for women because they have very little freedom. The religion prevents them from doing many things and most of the rules support men. The demonstration was peaceful but the police still came and arrested some of the demonstrators, while others managed to run away. This is just one example of the oppressive regime in Iran.

I first had problems when I was a student in Iran. I was at Azad University in Tehran and I had a lot of friends at Tehran University and at Elmandsanat University, which is also in Tehran. The students at these universities used to hold meetings where well-known intellectual speakers spoke on many subjects such as the economy, religion and culture. After about an hour, the intelligence service, who are stronger than the Baseej, would come in and break the meeting up.

Some of the more active students 'disappeared' and were never seen again, some were arrested and imprisoned, others were not arrested but were restricted in what they were allowed to do, such as getting a job with the government. I used to go to these meetings but I sat in the audience so I was not treated in the same way as the more active students. But we were threatened; we were told we were being filmed and that we would be in trouble if we were seen there again.

Shortly after I had finished my university studies in 1999, I took part in a student demonstration outside Tehran University. I was arrested, along with other students, and taken to Evin Prison in Tehran, where I was tortured both physically and mentally. I was whipped and beaten. Religious fanatics with long beards came and tried to force me to say what my purpose was and who else I knew who was active against the government. I heard someone screaming and was told that it was my mother and that she would be harmed if I did not tell them what they wanted to know. We were put in the same part of the prison as murderers and other hardened criminals. The conditions were very bad. Everything was very dirty and I lost some teeth, probably because of the bad water.

I also had to have an operation for a hernia while I was in prison. The doctor was very young and I don't think he was specialised enough to carry out this operation and it was not successful. I now have to have another hernia operation in the UK.

I was supposed to stay in prison for five years but I was released after two years and eight months because I was in a bad state mentally. But, although I was released, there were a lot of rules and conditions about what I could and could not do.

I was not given my degree when I finished my studies because I was known to be against the regime in Iran as the intelligence service has the names of such people on file. People on this list sometimes use bribery to get a letter saying they have passed their finals but they cannot get their degree. I had nothing when I left university.

After my release from prison, I started to teach Maths privately at home. I had no problem with my students because they were not concerned with the government, but I could not get a job in a school because I did not have my degree. You need a degree from the Ministry of Education but I was on file so I could not get one. All employers asked about religion. ID cards stated a person's religion. If you did not go along with the Islamic religion, it ruled out everything. You need good connections to get a good job and that means government or religious connections – they are all tied in together

I had two choices – I could have stayed in Iran but I would have committed suicide. There was no life for me there. You cannot even have a girlfriend because if you do, your family say you are not a true Muslim. And if you go out in the street, you can be questioned by the Baseej about having a girlfriend. They will then inform both families (who are usually unaware of the relationship) to make trouble and get it stopped. There are problems about marrying too, though these are worse for women because of the religious rules.

The other choice was to leave Iran. It was like a dream to escape, to go to a Western country where there is freedom and opportunity. To someone living in a repressive country like Iran, it seemed like Heaven. I wanted to escape but there were always problems - I did not have enough money, or it was not safe to leave.

In the end, my older brother helped me to escape. He does not have any problems in Iran because he is a moderate. He always told me not to argue, to agree with the family, but I could not. Then he suggested that I leave Iran and said that he would help me to do so. He found an agent near the border with Turkey. I was told that I had a 90% chance of getting somewhere safe, and a

10% chance that I would be arrested or killed on the journey. I decided to take the chance. If my brother had not forced me to leave Iran and helped me, I would not have left and I would have committed suicide.

I didn't really know where I would be going when I first spoke to the agent. He told me that the UK was the best country because of the rules here. I did not know anything about asylum. I thought that if I went somewhere illegally, I would be arrested as I would have been in Iran.

The agent found a lorry that was going directly to the UK. I arrived in Dover at the end of July 2005 and was surprised not to be arrested but everyone was very polite. I was told how to claim asylum and then I was kept at Dover for four or five days. I had a Home Office interview there and I was then dispersed to Hastings. My solicitor referred me to the Medical Foundation for the Victims of Torture because of my physical and mental symptoms following my experiences in Iran. Their report was sent to the Home Office but I have not yet received a decision about my asylum claim.

I go to Hastings College of Art and Technology to learn English. I have been there for seven months and my English is quite fluent. I would now like to do an accountancy course.

I have found the people in Hastings very helpful and friendly. I have made friends with some Christian people and they have given me a lot of support.

I am still in touch with my older brother in Iran. He told me that officials from the intelligence service have been to my family's home looking for me. My family said that they do not know where I am. The intelligence service said that they will kill me if they find me. My younger brother, who is doing his military service at the moment, has been questioned about me. He says that he does not know what has happened to me but he thinks I am dead. My brother said that the family's phone is being tapped, so I can't phone them. I could not go back to Iran now.

I knew Akbar Mohammadi, a student leader who died in prison in July this year. He was a student and then a lecturer at Tehran University, and he and his brother were very active against the Iranian government. I read that the official explanation was that he died because he had been on hunger strike but that many people think there was more to it than that.

Iran (2)

I left my country, Iran, because I do not believe in Islam as people are supposed to do. Most people in Iran follow the rules of Islam, which are very strict. Under Sharia law, anyone who does not follow Islam is persecuted. They are punished by being stoned and sometimes they are executed by hanging. In the opinion of the religious leaders and authorities, if you do not follow Islam, you are a non-believer.

Near where I lived there was a sports and community centre where Christians went. Christians are allowed to practise their religion in Iran provided they have not converted from Islam. Even so, these Christians kept their activities secret. I was not allowed to go into the centre but every time I passed, I saw the same lady going there. I was interested in learning about Christianity and so I began to talk to her when I saw her. Then I fell in love with her. There are many restrictions in Iran about relationships between men and women and you have to abide by the laws which are enforced by the authorities.

After a few months of seeing this lady, I asked her to tell her family about our friendship but she said that her family would not let her have a relationship with a Muslim. My family said that it was my choice but hers would not agree. So I made a plan with her for us to leave the city where we lived and go to another part of the country. I thought that if we did that, her family might agree to our relationship. While we were living in a different city, she phoned her father to see if he had changed his mind. He said if I converted to Christianity, he would let me marry her; otherwise, he would not.

I decided to comply with his wishes as I did not like the Islamic religion and I was interested in Christianity. We went back to our home city and I started reading the Bible and learning more about the religion. I also attended church for about a year. By this time, I had converted to Christianity. But it was not easy with my girlfriend's family. She told me that, before she met me, her cousin had asked her family if he could marry her but they would not agree.

One evening, I was working late at my job as a carpenter so I phoned my family to say I would be late getting home. My brother told me that some men had come looking for me. They were not in uniform so he thought they were from the Intelligence Services, who do not wear uniform

I did not go home after I had learned that news. I went to stay with one of my friends that night. I thought the Intelligence Services must have found out about my conversion to Christianity as I had not had problems with the authorities before. I told my friend everything and asked him to help me. I asked if he had a friend in the Intelligence Services and if he could find out why they were looking for me. He made a few phone calls and we waited for a response. Late the following night, my friend said to me, 'They have found out that you have been going to church and that you have converted to Christianity. That is why they are looking for you.'

I moved round between friends for about five days. I did not have any contact with my girlfriend. Then my friend said, 'If you are caught, you face execution.' He had details about people who had been executed for similar reasons.

I decided that I could not stay in Iran. I had a friend who had relatives and friends in Azerbaijan. I asked him to help me leave the country. One night shortly after this, my friend and I crossed the border into Azerbaijan. We stayed there for a few days, waiting for a man who had connections with an agent who trafficked people from Azerbaijan to other parts of the world. After two days, the agent put me in a van and we drove through the night. I was asleep and when I woke up I saw that we were in a green, mountainous area.

We stayed there until nightfall and then I was transferred to another vehicle, a bit smaller than a lorry. The agent provided a small area for me to sit in the lorry and gave me some biscuits, chocolate and bottles of water. The driver checked the tyres and other things and then we drove off. I couldn't see what was going on. The agent told me not to make any noise and to be patient until we reached a safe place or we would be in trouble.

We changed lorries two or three times and each time I asked them where we were. They said, 'You do not need to know.' I said, 'You are playing with my life, keeping me in a lorry with no food and sometimes no water.' They said, 'This is your last chance. Soon you will be in a safe place.'

Then on the afternoon of 1st May 2003, the lorry was opened up by immigration officials and I was caught. They took me into a building and I saw a sign which said 'UK Immigration'. I was interviewed and they took my fingerprints. I was taken to a detention centre which was like a prison. There was a lot of security and CCTV. I found out later it was at Gatwick because there was a sign on the next building saying 'Gatwick Immigration Centre'. I was given another screening interview, my fingerprints were taken again and I was photographed. Then they bought me a ticket and gave me a lift to a coach station. The ticket was to London Heathrow and they told me how to find the bus. I could speak a little English so I asked a lady at a desk where I could get a coach to Heathrow.

I got the bus and arrived at Heathrow. I waited there a long time because I did not know where to go. Then I saw a small notice saying, 'Arrivals Project UK'. The project was to help people arriving in the UK, so I asked someone there what I should do. They took me in a minicab to a hotel in Hounslow West, where I stayed. I found a solicitor in Uxbridge. I had a Home Office interview in Liverpool and my application for asylum was refused. My solicitor lodged an appeal.

Two months later, on 7th July 2003, I was transferred to Hastings where I began to study English at Hastings International College. I studied English for two years and was awarded some certificates. I also did a computing course.

I have been to Court four times for appeal hearings and am still waiting for a decision on the final hearing. I now have a legal advisor in Brighton and fresh evidence about my case has been submitted to the Home Office and the Court. So, even though I have been in the UK for over three years, my case has still not been resolved. Whatever happens, I certainly cannot go back to Iran.

I have been in touch with my family and they are all right. Last time I contacted my girlfriend, she told me that she was getting married. It has been such a long time since I left Iran so I cannot blame her for getting on with her life. If I had been granted refugee status, I would have liked for her to join me in the UK but that has obviously not been possible.

Iraq

I was living and working in Baghdad, in Iraq, when I was forced to leave the country because my life was in grave danger. I left Iraq in July 2005.

In June 2002, I completed the first part of my university studies and graduated with a BSc in Mechanical Engineering. In October of the same year, I began to study for an MSc, also in Mechanical Engineering. I had several different jobs while I was studying for my MSc, and I started the last of these in April 2004. This was for a company in Baghdad which carried out mechanical and civil engineering contracts, and my job title was Mechanical Engineer and Engineering Consultant. At the time, the Company had been contracted to work on some projects in central Iraq for the US Army as part of the programme to rebuild Iraq after the war. Because we dealt with the Americans, a lot of the insurgents and other groups considered that we were traitors. This was of course untrue as we were merely redeveloping the country following the war. Nevertheless, we got a lot of threats from these people.

Osama, the manager of the Company I worked for, was one of my best friends and we both received many threats from people who thought we were traitors. We received threatening letters and we were threatened with death on at least three occasions. On one occasion, we were in Osama's car when a group of people attacked us. Osama did not stop the car; he drove faster and so we escaped, but Osama was injured and had to have a bolt in his arm. On another occasion, some people put a landmine on the drive of my house but fortunately my younger brother discovered it before it could explode.

One day, when I arrived at work, I got a telephone call from the Assistant Head of the Company, telling me that Osama had been murdered. He ordered me to close the Company and tell everyone to go home. He gave me what details he could about Osama's death, but he did not know very much at that stage, except that he assumed Osama had been murdered by one of these groups who had been threatening us.

This news came as a big shock for me and I was very confused and nervous. I didn't know what to do. I went to the place where Osama had been killed, which was about 100 metres from his house. He had been on his way to buy breakfast, as he did every morning. I found his car crashed by a wall with smashed windows and holes in the bodywork. There were traces of blood on the seats and cushions. I asked some people who were standing there what had happened to the person in the car. They told me that an ambulance had taken him to hospital. I did not see any police there and so I decided to go to the nearest police station to report the incident. I thought the police would help me to find out who had assassinated Osama.

It was difficult to get into the police station because it was surrounded by a concrete wall to protect the police from insurgents. There were two guards standing outside but they refused to let me go in. I told them that someone had been killed and that they should do something about it. They said they would try but I knew they would not do anything – people are killed every day in Iraq and the authorities cannot control the situation.

I was disappointed by the reaction of the police but there was nothing more I could do there. I then called Osama's brother to ask which hospital Osama had been taken to. I told him that his brother had been murdered by insurgents and he said he knew this and that Osama had been taken to Alyarmooq Hospital in Baghdad. I said that I was going to find out what had happened to my friend. Osama's brother told me that he had died on the way to hospital. He said there was no point in going to the hospital as Osama had been taken to somewhere outside Baghdad, where his family lived.

I went home feeling very confused and nervous. I couldn't eat or see anyone for a whole day. I felt very sad and I couldn't think what to do. The next day, I decided to visit Osama's family to offer my condolences. I disguised myself a bit by covering part of my face as I was afraid the insurgents would see me and I would get the same treatment as Osama. The Assistant Head of the Company, who had called me about Osama, was at his family's home when I got there. He had come to offer his condolences and he had also disguised himself. He said that we should stay in hiding for a while so the insurgents did not find us.

When I got back from seeing Osama's family, I was in a dilemma. I didn't know whether to leave Baghdad and go to somewhere else in Iraq, or whether to stay in hiding at home. I couldn't sleep. My mother saw the state I was in and tried to comfort me. She said that people were dying every day in Iraq and that I shouldn't let it affect my life. She said that Osama would not want me to be like this. We discussed my situation and she suggested that I leave Baghdad. I could not go to southern Iraq as the people there are Shia Muslims and, although my family is not religious, we are Sunni and had to say so on any documents. So I would have faced a bad situation as Shias do not like Sunnis. My mother suggested that I go to northern Iraq as she thought it would be safer for me there.

I decided to go to Kirkuk, where I was born and where I had a maternal cousin. I started my preparations to leave Baghdad in the morning. My older brother went out to check the area to see if it was safe for me to leave. He came with me to the bus station; we thought it would be safer for me to travel by bus than by car. When I arrived in Kirkuk, I stayed with my cousin. Unfortunately, however, I found that the situation there was not that much better than in Baghdad. There are lots of problems between Arabs and Kurds in Kirkuk; Kurdish armed groups are trying to get rid of the Arabs because they think Kirkuk belongs to them. So it was difficult for me, as an Arab, to stay in Kirkuk. I had a long discussion with my cousin and he suggested that I leave Iraq. I did not want to leave my country but he persuaded me that my life was in danger. I began to think seriously about this and asked him how I could leave as I hadn't got my passport with me and I couldn't leave the country without it. I was carrying a lot of money which I had brought from Baghdad as I had anticipated that life would be difficult and I would need it. I had more than US \$9000. My cousin said that the best way would be to leave illegally. I was not very keen on this idea but I saw that there was no alternative. My cousin arranged for me to go with someone he knew who lived in the Zakho quarter of Duhok province in northern Iraq, which is in the Kurdish area.

When I went to Zakho to make my travel arrangements, I decided to have one last try at staying in Iraq. I stayed in Zakho for nine days but it was a horrible time as the people there are Kurds who do not like Arabs, especially Arabs from Baghdad. They believe Arabs are only interested in harming the Kurds as they think everyone in Baghdad supported Saddam's regime. Nobody would talk to me; it was even difficult to buy anything from the markets, particularly as I could not speak Kurdish. I found life very difficult there and so I decided to take my cousin's advice and leave Iraq. I paid my cousin's friend US \$7500 to travel to Turkey and from there to a place of safety, which was the UK although I didn't know where I was being taken at the time. I travelled to Istanbul by car and then I was hidden on a bus, in a specially prepared space under the back seats. I travelled on this bus for five days until we arrived in a forest area where I was moved to another bus, again hiding in a space under the back seats. I travelled for four days on the second bus and then it drove on to a ship – I suppose it was a ferry – which took me to the UK.

I arrived in the UK at 6am on 6th August 2005. The driver opened the lid of my hiding place on the bus and told me that we had arrived at our destination and I should go. I don't know where we had landed but the driver told me that I should go to Dover. It took me about 40 minutes to walk there. When I arrived in Dover, the first thing I did was to try to find the authorities so that I could explain my situation. I did not know anything about claiming asylum at that stage. I knew I had entered the UK illegally and I asked some people in Dover to guide me to the police station so I could explain everything to them. At the police station, I said that I had arrived in the UK illegally. I expected them to arrest me or something but they did not do anything. I decided to find someone who could help me and I was told that the Information Desk would be the best place. I think it was part of an office for asylum seekers. The man there was very helpful and understood my situation but he told me that the office for asylum seekers was closed as it was a Saturday. It would not be open until Monday.

By this time it was the afternoon as it had taken me a long time to do all this. I was very hungry but I only had American dollars and the shops would only accept Sterling. I changed \$100 for about £70 and bought some food. I couldn't stay in Dover and so I decided to go to London. I asked some people how to get there and they said I could go by bus or train. I decided to go by bus as it was cheaper. I could not speak English very well at the time - I had been fairly used to reading and writing English in Iraq but I had not spoken it much. When I arrived at London Victoria Bus Station, I asked an Englishman where I could find someone who spoke Arabic. He advised me to go to the Edgware Road where a lot of Arabs lived. I went there and found some Arabs who advised me to go to the Home Office in Croydon to claim asylum. I was worried about coming into the country illegally but they said a lot of people come in that way. They said I should go to the Home Office on Monday as it was closed for the weekend.

I asked where I could stay and someone recommended a hotel in London. I stayed there for two days and on Monday I went to the Home Office. Unfortunately, I went to Croydon by bus and the journey took such a long time that by the time I arrived at the Home Office it was closed. I went again the next day and explained everything to them. The Home Office asked me for documentary evidence and I said that I would try to get it from Iraq.

I sent messages to my family, who did not know that I had left Iraq and was in the UK. Before I left Baghdad, I had told my family to announce my death to put the insurgents off the track. I now sent an e-mail to my older brother telling him what had happened, and contacted a cousin who was a student in Germany. I told my cousin my situation but asked him to keep it a secret. I was afraid for my family as I thought that if the insurgents found out I was in the UK, they would kidnap or kill them. I asked my cousin to try to check on my family. His family are in Jordan but I said if he knew of anyone who was going to Iraq, could he ask them to see if my family was alright. I also needed to get my documents to prove that I had been working in Iraq, what my profession and qualifications were and so on. I also made contact with officers from the US Army to get evidence from them about what had happened to Osama. and the danger I had been facing.

My cousin told me that he knew someone who was going to Iraq and would check on my family without saying I was in the UK. This person went to our house and found it empty so he called some of my friends. He said that he was calling on behalf of my cousin and asked them about my family. My friends told him that my family had left Baghdad but that no one knew where they were. I asked my cousin to give me the phone number of my uncle who lives in the United States. I called my uncle and told him everything. I asked him to investigate what had happened to my family by calling some of his friends but asked him to keep my whereabouts secret. He did this but got the same response as my cousin's friend had.

After I had been in the UK for about 20 days, I received an e-mail from my brother. He told me the family had moved to another address in Baghdad as they had received threatening letters, and that life was very difficult for them in hiding. He said that they were arranging to leave Baghdad and were getting their passports organised. He also told me that the family had announced my death three days after I left home.

The Home Office refused my application for asylum because my documents had not arrived so I did not have any evidence to back up my story. It was difficult to get these documents because I only had a temporary address in London to begin with so it was not safe to have anything sent there. I only had e-mail and the Home Office would not accept that.

By the time I received my refusal, I had moved to Hastings and had a proper address. I lodged an appeal through my solicitors in London. By the time my appeal was heard, I had received lots of documents and had witnesses who were prepared to speak up for me. The US Army supported me and so did the Assistant Head of the Company I had worked for in Baghdad. He sent me documents that proved I had been working for the Company and in what capacity, and I also had proof that I had a BSc and an MSc from university in Iraq, as well as a death certificate stating that I had died in an explosion, which was what my family had announced when reporting my death.

My appeal was granted on 20th February 2006. I was given full refugee status.

Life had not been easy for my family even before the war in Iraq. They were rich merchants who were well-known in Iraq, but they did not support Saddam Hussein or the Ba'ath Party (the ruling party under Saddam). During Saddam's regime, the Iraqi government seized 78 million Iraqi Dinars (about US \$6,500,000) from my father. They tried to arrest and hang my uncle, who was a rich trader, but he managed to escape to Jordan. He sensed that Iraqi Intelligence was tracking him there so he went to the US Embassy who granted him an immigration visa to go to the United States. He was granted residency rights to work and live there and he has been there ever since.

Life was good during my childhood but it became more difficult during the 1990s because of Saddam Hussein and his regime. Day by day, the government worked against my father, prohibiting him from buying property or investing in his business, and freezing his money so he could not leave Iraq.

I was 18 and in my last year at secondary school when lots of things began to happen to my family. My oldest brother, who had completed two years as a computer engineering student, gave that up in 1998 to take over the family import/export business, as my father could no longer do anything himself because he was opposed to the Ba'ath Party.

I left school in the same year, 1998, and went to university to study Mechanical Engineering. I had problems because I was not in the Ba'ath Party. I was approached and asked to join the party while I was at university; they try to force students to join and if they refuse they are not given scholarships and are given punishments for every small thing they do wrong.

I was studying for my MSc for the rest of Saddam's time in power. I completed my studies in May 2005. It took three years to complete my MSc because of the war in Iraq. I worked during the three years to gain experience.

When I got my job with the mechanical and civil engineering company in 2004, I was threatened by insurgents, but before Osama was killed I did not make too much of it because everyone was being threatened at that time – Christians, Sunnis and Shias, Arabs and Kurds, insurgents. When I left Iraq, civil war was coming. The Iraqi government doesn't care about the situation, which is getting worse. The victims in all of this are the civilians who just want to get on with their lives.

Ivory Coast, West Africa (1)

In my country, the Ivory Coast, I was the Secretary of a political club which supported the main opposition parties against the government. This made me a rebel in the eyes of the authorities.

My first arrest was in 1999 when I took part in a student demonstration. I was detained for two days but on that occasion my older brother found me at the police station and managed to negotiate my release. In 2001, I was beaten by a group of young people when I was coming back from a meeting of my party, the *Rassemblement des Republicains* (RDR)

In 2002, I was arrested again and detained for four days. The camp where I was being held was attacked by rebels. Most of us detainees were in a cell together and in the confusion we managed to break the padlock on the cell door and escape. We ran away. The people who were in charge of the camp shot at us and some of us fell but I ran on. I fell over and hurt myself but I struggled on because I had to escape.

After this escape, I got threatening letters and I was afraid to go out in case I was caught. The threat of being captured was always there but at the time I thought it was part of the life I had chosen.

I was not arrested again until 2004 but it was the events leading from this that made me realise that I must leave the Ivory Coast. This time, I was detained for three months. During this time, I was kicked with boots and beaten with fists and weapon butts. Then a gendarme there recognised me because he was a friend of my sister's husband. He helped me to escape by giving me sour milk to drink so that I was sick. He said that my only chance to escape was to go to the hospital because there would not be a guard on the ward and the nurse would not expect me to try to escape. He took me to the hospital and told me to wait for my opportunity to escape.

I was sick in the hospital but I knew I had to summon up the energy to escape. One night, I told the nurse that I was going to the toilet, and I ran away. I got well away but I knew I had to stay in hiding or I would be caught and detained again. I went to my father for help because I was very sick from my treatment in prison. My father told me he had been visited by government officials and they were after me. He said I could not stay there as it was too dangerous. I told him that if they found me they would detain me again. I went into hiding at my sister's friend's house. Then I heard that my father had been killed. I was very scared because I knew he had been killed because of me. There was nothing I could do but leave the country as I thought they would find me and kill me. Friends of mine had been killed for doing the same things as me – some of them disappeared, others were found in a mass grave. I thought I would suffer the same fate. I found someone who arranged everything for me. He took me to a country which was safer and the next day I flew to the UK.

I arrived in London, then went to Birmingham where I claimed asylum. On 16th September 2004, I was sent to Oakington Reception Centre in Cambridgeshire, where I was detained for six days. I presented my case to a legal representative at Oakington but I was still sick, so I was released on 22nd September and sent to Hastings. I was not badly treated at Oakington – I had a nurse who treated me because I was ill.

I arrived in Hastings on 22nd September 2004 and shortly after my arrival I went to the International Department of Hastings College to study English. I am now studying Construction at the College. As yet, I have not received a decision about my asylum application. I have been waiting for 16 months and have not even been interviewed by the Home Office yet. I am living at the Adelphi Hotel and the conditions there are not good. I do not have permission to work so I cannot support myself.

I am 32 years old. I thought it would be better in the UK than in my country because of all the problems there. I had a girlfriend at home and I was planning to settle down. I had a letter from her in 2005 but since then there has been no news. In her letter, my girlfriend told me that my younger brother had had some trouble because of me. He was a teacher but he had to flee from the authorities. My sister and her husband, whose friend helped me to escape, have had problems because of this and have also fled. My older brother was arrested but I don't know what has happened to him since. I have had no more news about any of them.

Since conducting this interview, this interviewee has been granted full refugee status in the UK.

Ivory Coast, West Africa (2)

I left the Ivory Coast as a result of events following the uprising by rebels in September 2002. My problems began in October 2002 and continued until I left Africa in September 2004.

On 19th September 2002, rebels from the north of the Ivory Coast staged an attempted military coup against the government. The reason they gave for the attempted coup was that they feared demobilisation by the government but we found out afterwards that that was not the real reason and that they wanted to take over power in the south. The coup failed but what had started as an uprising became a war and I was unfortunately dragged into it against my will.

My family originally came from the north of the Ivory Coast. We are Dioula people and Muslims, while people in the south - where the capital, Abidjan, is - are Christians. Since independence from France in 1960, the country has been ruled by Christians. One party, the *Partie Démocratique de Côte d'Ivoire* (PDCI), was in power from 1960 to 1990, after which opposition parties were created in the interests of democracy. People from the north were marginalised by people from the south. It was difficult to get ID, for example, because you had to prove that you were of pure Ivorian descent, which meant you had to show that your grandparents were pure Ivorian. This was very difficult for many people.

My parents had moved to the south, where the work and resources are, and were living in Abidjan at the time of the uprising. I had lived with them there until I finished my studies at university, but then I moved to Bouaké, a city in the centre of the country, to find work. As a student, I had joined a political party, the *Rassemblement de Republicain* (RDR), which had a leader from the north. Many people from the north identified with this party but they were Muslims and the Christians in the south did not want a Muslim leader.

So I was in Bouaké on the 19th September 2002, when the uprising began. Fighting took place in many towns, but the main centres were Abidjan, Bouaké and Korhogo, the largest city in the far north. The fighting began at night between different military camps, some of which were pro-government and others were not.

I was stuck in Bouaké because of the situation. The rebels took control in Korhogo and Bouaké but not in Abidjan; they were pushed north by government forces in Abidjan.

Fighting between rebel and government forces created a front line across the centre of the country, from the border with Ghana in the east to the Liberian border in the west, thus dividing the north from the south. The line was just to the south of Bouaké, which was under rebel control. The rebels took people, including children, by force and made them join their army in the north. I was taken by force in October 2002 and had to stay in the north with them until February 2004, when I managed to escape. It was the most terrible time of my life. I saw many atrocities - people killed because they tried to escape, people tortured or treated violently because they would not obey the rebels.

I also suffered because I had had an illness in my childhood, as a result of which I was not as fit as I might have been. I was not tortured but the training was very hard for me and I became ill. Then the government forces found out that I was in the rebel force. When I called my mother, she said she had had visits from southern militia forces, looking for me. They said I was a rebel and so I should die.

I wanted to find a way to escape but I didn't know where I could go. I couldn't stay in the north as the rebels would kill me if they recaptured me - people were expected to stay with the rebel forces for life. I couldn't go to the south because the government forces were looking for me and would arrest me for being, as they thought, a rebel.

Meanwhile, the government and the rebel forces had signed an accord for a ceasefire but it was fragile because no one respected it.

In February 2004, I decided to try to escape, even if I risked being killed. I still did not know where to go as I was afraid I would put my family in danger if I went to the south. One night, I took the opportunity to escape. There was a ceasefire in force and a new accord had been signed. The two sides had agreed to work together and things were quieter, so I just left, taking great care that no one saw me. I went to Abidjan because I didn't know what else to do. My mother told me I couldn't stay because my situation would put the family in too much danger. I had left the rebel force because I had been forced to stay there against my will, and now my family were telling me I couldn't stay with them because it was too dangerous. That didn't leave me many choices.

There was a big forest near where my family lived; it was in a suburb of Abidjan. Some people lived in the forest and I went there to try to decide what to do. I stayed there, in hiding, for almost a month. It was very hard.

In March 2004, all the opposition parties in Abidjan staged a big rally in support of the peace agreement. The government did not agree with this rally; they said that if the opposition could gather a lot of people together, the international world would say that the government was in the minority. The government party, the *Front Populaire Ivoirien* (FPI) feared the RDR and during the rally, they accused the RDR of encouraging rebellion because most of its members were from the north. A lot of people were killed by government forces and militia during the rally. Some people disappeared and were never seen again. Those days, the 24th to 26th March, were terror days in Abidjan. During this time, government militia came to my family's house and took my mother, my brother and my sister away. The news spread to the suburbs and I heard about it - now I couldn't stay there any more. I thought of going back to the rebels to see what would happen but I knew I would be killed because I had gone to the south.

I left Abidjan and headed south-east to the border with Ghana, a distance of about 200 kilometres. I travelled by night, going from village to village by minibus. On one of these journeys, I was sitting next to someone from the south - you can tell where people come from in the Ivory Coast because of their surnames. Not everyone in the south agrees with the way people in the north are treated. This man lived in France and had come to the Ivory Coast for a holiday.

I was looking dirty and unkempt because I had been in hiding for so long. The man on the bus asked me if I was in trouble. I told him about everything that had happened to me, in the north and in Abidjan. I didn't know what to expect from him; I thought perhaps he would give me some money to help me out. But he did something really unexpected. He said he had seen what was happening in the country, and that he was a Christian from the south. He said that he hadn't much to give me and then he gave me his Bible. He asked me if I was going to cross the border rather than going back to the rebel force, and advised me to go to Ghana and claim asylum there. I said that I didn't know where to go but that I thought I would stay in hiding and see what happened.

He gave me some money, and he also gave me his passport so that I could cross the border into Ghana. I asked him what he would do without his passport. He said that he was a French citizen and that he would go to the French Embassy about it. This man was not a member of my family but we were about the same height and looked alike - we could have been brothers. I don't know if that is why he helped me.

In May 2004, I crossed the border into Ghana. I stayed there for three months but it was difficult. I moved from place to place but I could only speak French and Ghana is an English-speaking country. Fortunately, I met a man who spoke French. He was from the Ivory Coast and he gave me some money to help me out. He told me that I couldn't stay in Ghana as the government there has agreements with governments of other West African countries so if I was picked up they could return me to the Ivory Coast. I said that I didn't know what to do if I couldn't stay in Ghana. I asked him if I could stay with him for a while until the situation in the Ivory Coast stabilised. He said that wouldn't be possible as he travelled a lot and also that he would be in trouble if he let me stay with him. But he said that he would try to help me if he could.

One night, I was picked up by Ghana Immigration. I was with another man from the Ivory Coast who had also been forced to leave the country because of the situation there, as many people were. The other guy saw the Immigration officials coming and managed to escape, but he let my friend know what had happened. When I was arrested, the immigration officials saw that I had a French passport and they said that as I was a French citizen I could go to the French Embassy in the Ivory Coast if I had any problems. They said that there was also a United Nations peacekeeping force along the dividing north/south line – 4000 French soldiers and 6000 UN forces – so they would not grant me asylum in Ghana even if I claimed it because they thought I was a French citizen.

I was told that I was in Ghana illegally and so couldn't stay there, but that I would be kept under arrest until they had come to a decision about what to do with me.

The next day, they came and said someone had paid for my release. It was my friend who had said he would try to help me – he had paid 200,000 Ghanaian Cedi (around £13). He said the situation was tough and that he had done his best to have me set free as they could have sent me back to the Ivory Coast. He told me that I was lucky about the timing as he was about to travel to Europe – if he had been away he would not have been able to help me. He said it would be safer for me to leave the country. I asked how I could do that as I only had a French passport and no other documents. He said that was OK – with a French passport I could go to Europe without a visa, though I would need a visa for African countries. He advised me to go to Europe to claim asylum.

On 27th September, the day before my birthday, he came to me with an air ticket. I asked him where I was going. He said there was no time to tell me. He gave me the ticket and some money to get to the airport. When I got there I discovered that my destination was the UK. I don't know why he did not choose France, but it may have been easier to get a ticket to England from Ghana.

I arrived in the UK on my birthday, 28th September, and claimed asylum at the airport – I think it was Heathrow. I was detained by Immigration and then taken to Oakington Detention Centre in Cambridgeshire. I gave them my passport and details of the fee paid for my release in Ghana. I explained my situation, that I was in fear of my life in the Ivory Coast - I could not go to the north or to the south because I would either be killed by the rebels or arrested by the government authorities. Within a week, I had my decision – it was a refusal. I was still at Oakington when I heard this news. I was advised that I could appeal against the decision. I was then released from Oakington and sent to Hastings. I appealed through a solicitor in London and my appeal was granted on 17th January 2005, five months after I arrived in the UK. I was granted full refugee status.

When I arrived in Hastings, I went to the International Department at Hastings College to learn English. I had a temporary administration job in Hastings and I am now looking for work. I studied Computer Science at university in the Ivory Coast and I would like to find a job in IT here so I can make use of these skills. I am still going to College, doing an IT course to get a British qualification, as well as continuing to study English.

I haven't heard anything from my family since they were taken by government forces, so I have no idea what has happened to them. The Ivory Coast is still in trouble – two months after I left, the ceasefire was broken by the government forces that attacked the rebels again. I would like to go back to my country if the situation there improves but I don't know if that will ever be possible.

Kosovo

I fled from Kosovo with my family in early 1999, when the war there was threatening our lives. Before that, I lived in Rrashique-Pej, which is a village about two miles from Pej (or Pec), one of the largest cities in Kosovo. I lived there with my parents and my brother, who is two years younger than me. My father was a mechanic and my mother was a housewife. We were ethnic Albanians.

I was about 14 years old when the war in Kosovo began. There had been small attacks by the Serbs against the ethnic Albanians for some time before that but they did not lead to anything more – they were just like clashes between different racial groups in towns and cities here in the UK. The rest of Europe was not aware of any conflict at the time.

Everything seemed quiet enough but then we began to notice tension and unrest among our Serb neighbours. Our village had a mixed population of Serbs and Albanians, like most places in Kosovo at the time. The two groups were friendly towards each other most of the time, though there were good and bad Serbs, just as there are in any group of people.

The tension arose because Serbs in the village had heard from relatives in Serbia that there was going to be a bad attack on us. They could not just come out and say anything because we were on opposite sides in this conflict. But Serbs who trusted friends amongst the Albanians had told them what they had heard, not thinking that it would go any further. But the word spread and soon the whole village knew that there was going to be a big attack. Some people prepared to leave the area but others decided to stay. They didn't believe the rumours and they did not want to leave their homes and all their possessions – most people didn't have any transport so it was a matter of leaving with what they could take on foot. Besides, they did not want the Serbs to get their land.

My family decided to leave the village and go to Albania, where we had relatives. From Albania, my father paid people to take us to Italy and from there to France. We went from France to Belgium by lorry and then came to England on another lorry.

After we had left Kosovo, we heard from contacts that had stayed in hiding and had left after us, that the Serbs had attacked the village, burned the houses down and executed all the male Albanians who had stayed there, even young children. The people who told us about this had only managed to escape because they knew hiding places which the Serbs did not know about. The Serbs came in groups and systematically set about destroying the village until there was nothing left.

But luckily we had managed to get away in time. When we arrived in England and got on to the motorway, the lorry stopped at a big parking place and the driver got out for a break. When he had gone, I cut a hole in the plastic canopy of the lorry so that we could get out. We were walking along beside the motorway when the police spotted us. They took us to a police station where we had our fingerprints and photographs taken. Then we were sent to Social Services at Caterham in Surrey, where we claimed asylum. From there, we were sent to a hotel in London, and then to a hotel in Bournemouth where we stayed for seven months. It was a terrible time; the hotel was run by English people who were very prejudiced against us and treated us badly. At this time, none of us could speak English and I did not go to school even though I was still only 14 or 15.

When we had been at the Bournemouth hotel for two months, we went to the Home Office for a screening interview. After 10 months, we had to go to the Home Office again, this time for our full interview when we were asked why we had left Kosovo and claimed asylum in the UK. We did not have a solicitor at the time so we went to the interview on our own. By this time, I could speak English quite well, though the Home Office caseworker and interpreter did not know that. I realised that the interpreter was not translating accurately. She twisted what we said and then told the caseworker that she did not think we were telling the truth. When we were about to leave the building after the interview, the caseworker told us that it was time to go home to Kosovo now. Not long after this, we got a letter from the Home Office refusing our claim for asylum.

We went to a solicitor in Bournemouth to find out what we could do next. The solicitor told us that we did not have much of a case. He did not suggest that we appeal against the Home Office decision, though I know now that we could have done that.

We were transferred to Portsmouth, where we stayed in a hotel for one year and three months. The hotel was run by foreigners and they treated us far better than the people in Bournemouth had. But we didn't know what would happen to us because we had been refused. We were just waiting to be sent home or to be sent to a detention centre until there were seats on a plane to Kosovo. I still don't know why the Home Office didn't do anything – it was a very unsettled time for us, not knowing what would happen.

From Portsmouth, we were sent to Hastings. I think it was 2002 by this time. Our main Social Services were still in Caterham but they linked up with Social Services in Hastings, who found us a flat. This was a big improvement on living in hotels, which we had been doing for over two years by this time.

When we came to Hastings, I went to the International Department of Hastings College to learn English. After nine months, my tutor said my English was good enough for me to progress on to something else, so the next year I enrolled at the main College for the Steps 16-19 Progression Programme, which is equivalent to a GCSE course. I passed two GCSE equivalents that year. After that, I had a year off. I was doing paperwork to the Home Office, trying to sort out our situation. Nothing new had happened but we had been trying to get something sorted out for four years by now. It was down to me to do all this paperwork because I was the only one in the family who could read and write English well enough. Dad had never been given permission to work and so we had to rely on Social Services. We only one ID paper for the whole family and this had got lost, so we could not open a bank account or anything like that.

After the year's gap, I went back to College to study Administration. I could not get any benefits at College this time – they paid for the course but nothing else – so I had to rely on Dad for financial support. I did the Administration course for a year, during 2004 and 2005. It was while I was doing this that we got the wonderful news that the Home Secretary had granted an amnesty to asylum-seeker families who had been in the UK since October 2000, provided they fulfilled certain criteria. *[The Amnesty (Backlog Clearance Programme) introduced by the then Home Secretary, David Blunkett, stipulated that Indefinite Leave to Remain in the UK would be granted to families who (1) had applied for asylum before 2nd October 2000; (2) had at least one dependent in the UK who had lived there since 2nd October 2000 and was still under 18 on 24th October 2003; and (3) did not include anyone who had a criminal conviction, an anti-social behaviour order, or conviction for a sexual offence, or had made multiple asylum applications.]*

I began to find out all about this. At first, we didn't believe it because there had been so many disappointments before. We still had the same solicitor in Bournemouth and there were lots of forms to fill in, but we were finally granted Indefinite Leave to Remain (ILR). We had been in the UK for about five years by then, most of the time not knowing what was going to happen to us.

We thought that nothing could happen to us now but six or seven months after we had been granted ILR, we got a letter from Kent saying that we had to go back to Kosovo. This gave us a real shock and we began to panic. I started to check it out and in the end they said that they had confused us with someone else.

After we had had ILR for one year, we applied for British citizenship. Before we could do that, Mum and Dad had to do an ESOL course so they could speak English well enough. My brother was OK because he had been to school and is now at College. We applied a month before the 'Life in Britain' test was introduced so we did not have to do that. People have told me that it is quite tough to pass and some have been refused citizenship because of this.

We got our citizenship and our British passports about three months ago. Since then, Dad has been trying to find work, without success so far. It is difficult to get work in Hastings and St Leonards and my parents are considering moving away to find work somewhere else. I went to Job Centre Plus to look for a job. I was sent on a two-week course which I hated but I have now started my first job. My ambition is to go into the Police Force and I would like to join the Community Police as a first step towards that.

I have now got a baby sister who is 18 months old and was of course born here in the UK. It was quite a surprise when my parents told me there was a new baby on the way but I think it will be very good for them to bring my sister up in the UK, particularly as it will not be long before my brother and I leave home – I am 21 now and he is 19.

We went to Belgium recently to see some friends and they told us there is still trouble in Kosovo. Our village was completely destroyed by the Serbs, though our friends told us it is now being restored. But I think there will always be problems in Kosovo.

I feel quite lucky, despite everything that has happened to us. I have been through a bad time and I have seen the worst of what it is like to be an asylum seeker and I think this has made me stronger. Now I would like to make a contribution to the UK. It has done a lot for me and now I would like to give something back.

Context: Political, Social and Economic

Republic of Cameroon (National name: République du Cameroun)

Cameroon is a central African nation on the Gulf of Guinea, bordered by Nigeria, the Central African Republic, the Republic of Congo, Equatorial Guinea, and Gabon. It has a population (2005 estimation) of 16,380,005. The capital, Yaounde, has an overall population of 1,395,200. French and English are both official languages, and there are 24 African major language groups.

(Source: *Infoplease*)

The President of Cameroon, Paul Biya of the *Rassemblement Démocratique du Peuple Camerounais* (RDPC), has been Head of State since 1982. He was re-elected in presidential elections in October 2004, amid allegations by opposition parties and the Catholic Bishops' Conference of Cameroon of vote-rigging and law-breaking. A Commonwealth Observer Group concluded that the electoral process lacked the necessary credibility in a number of key areas, including denying some voters the right to vote.

The government held on to power in presidential elections after using violence to disrupt peaceful opposition meetings. Political leaders were detained to prevent public meetings and demonstrations. One political prisoner died in prison, apparently from medical neglect. The government failed to investigate reports of torture, 'disappearances' or deaths in police custody independently or openly.

Opposition parties continued to operate under severe constraints. Their supporters were arbitrarily detained and their public gatherings obstructed by security forces. Protest marches by a coalition of opposition parties were forcibly obstructed. On 6 July 2004, a peaceful march in the capital, Yaounde, was blocked by hundreds of anti-riot gendarmes. Among the demonstrators said to have been assaulted were John Fru Ndi, leader of the Social Democratic Front (SDF), and SDF members of parliament. On 3 August, police officers and gendarmes reportedly surrounded and assaulted protesters near the central market in Yaounde.

John Kohtem, an SDF leader, was beaten to death on 20 August 2004 near Bamend, a North-West province, reportedly by followers of a local RDPC leader and members of parliament. Following mass protests by SDF supporters, 11 people were arrested in September in connection with the killing. The 11 and the members of parliament had not been formally charged by the end of 2004.

Political prisoners continued to be held. Several were in poor health and were denied medical care. Martin Cheonumu died in July 2004, days after complaining of abdominal pains. He was the second prisoner to die since he and 17 other defendants were convicted in 1999 after an unfair trial by a court controlled by the Ministry of Defence. The defendants were denied access to legal counsel in pre-trial detention. Detainees in police custody remained at risk of torture. No procedures were in place to ensure that unexplained deaths or reports of torture or 'disappearance' were independently or thoroughly investigated. Bruising and injuries on the body of Laurent Kougang, who died in police custody in April 2004, appeared to have been caused by severe beatings. After his arrest on 15 April, allegedly on suspicion of trafficking firearms, he was held at two police stations before being transferred to the central police station in Douala's Brazzaville district, where he died. No investigation was known to have been carried out into the circumstances of his death.

(Source: taken from *Amnesty International Report 2005*)

Democratic Republic of the Congo (National name: République Démocratique du Congo)

The Democratic Republic of the Congo, in west-central Africa, is bordered by the Republic of Congo, the Central African Republic, the Sudan, Uganda, Rwanda, Burundi, Tanzania, Zambia, Angola, and the Atlantic Ocean. The population (2006 estimation) is 62,660,551. The capital, Kinshasa, has a population (2003 estimation) of 6,541,300. The official language is French and there are four official indigenous languages, Lingala, Kiswahili, Kikongo and Tshiluba. There are over 200 ethnic groups, of which the largest is Bantu; the four largest groups, Mongo, Luba, Kongo (all Bantu), and the Mangbetu-Azande (Hamitic) make up about 45% of the population. Christianity is the major religion: 50% are Roman Catholic and 20% are Protestant, while 10% are Islamic, 10% are Kimbanguist, and other religions account for 10%.

The Congo achieved independence from Belgium in June 1960, and elections were held in the same month, following which Patrice Lumumba of the *Mouvement Nationale Congolais* (Congolese National Movement) became prime minister and Joseph Kasavubu of the Abako Party became head of state. But within weeks of independence, the mineral-rich Katanga Province, led by Moïse Tshombe, seceded from the new republic. Kasavubu and Lumumba were also in conflict with each other. Kasavubu staged a military coup in 1960 and handed Lumumba over to the Katangan forces. A UN investigating commission later found that Lumumba had been killed by a Belgian mercenary in the presence of Tshombe, who was then president of Katanga.

Tshombe rejected a national reconciliation plan submitted by the UN in 1962. Tshombe's troops fired on the UN force in December, and in the ensuing conflict Tshombe capitulated in January 1963. Kasavubu then named Tshombe premier in order to fight a spreading rebellion....Kasavubu abruptly dismissed Tshombe in 1965 but was then himself ousted by General Joseph-Desiré Mobutu, army chief of staff. He changed the country's name [from the Congo] to Zaire and his own to Mobutu Sese Seko....

Laurent Kabila and his guerrilla movement launched a seven-month campaign that ousted Mobutu in 1997, ending one of the world's most corrupt and megalomaniacal regimes.... The country was renamed the Democratic Republic of the Congo in 1997. But elation over Mobutu's downfall faded as Kabila's own autocratic style emerged, and he seemed devoid of a clear plan for reconstructing the country...Many Congolese dismissed him as a puppet ruler who allowed his country to be overrun by outsiders, particularly the Rwandans. At the same time, he alienated many of his supporters who had helped him to power, including Rwanda and Uganda.

In August 1998, Congolese rebel forces, backed by Kabila's former allies, Rwanda and Uganda, gained control of a large portion of the country until Angolan, Namibian and Zimbabwean troops came to Kabila's aid. In 1999, the Lusaka Accord was signed by all six of the countries involved, as well as by most, but not all, of the various rebel groups.

In January 2001, Kabila was assassinated, allegedly by one of his bodyguards. His young and inexperienced son Joseph became the new president. He demonstrated a willingness to engage in talks to end the civil war. In April 2002, the government agreed to a power-sharing arrangement with Ugandan-supported rebels, and in July, the presidents of the Congo and Rwanda signed an accord: Rwanda promised to withdraw its 35,000 troops from the eastern Congolese border; and the Congo would in turn disarm the thousands of Hutu militiamen in its territory, who threatened Rwandan security.... But the warring parties were slow to depart; most had been looting the Congo of its natural resources and had little incentive to end the war. More than 2.5 million people are estimated to have died in the Congo's complex four-year civil war, which involved seven foreign armies and numerous rebel groups that often fought among themselves.

Despite the peace agreement and power-sharing plan signed between the main parties in the Congolese war, the fighting and killing continued. In April 2003, hundreds of civilians were massacred in the eastern province of Ituri in an ethnic conflict. Joseph Kabila signed a new constitution in April and on 17 July 2003; Congo's new power-sharing government was inaugurated. But in 2004, peace was dangerously insecure. In May, an insurgency in Bukavu [in the east of the Congo] erupted, other areas of the Congo grew restive, and Rwanda continued to support various rebel groups fighting the government. By the end of 2004, the death toll from the conflict had reached 3.8 million.

(Source: *Infoplease*)

Rwanda: How the genocide happened

Between April and June 1994, an estimated 800,000 Rwandans were killed in the space of 100 days. Most of the dead were Tutsis – and most of those who perpetrated the violence were Hutus.

Even for a country with such a turbulent history as Rwanda, the scale and speed of the slaughter left its people reeling. The genocide was sparked by the death of the Rwandan president Juvenal Habyarimana, a Hutu, when his plane was shot down above Kigali airport on 6 April 1994....

Within hours of the attack, a campaign of violence spread from the capital throughout the country, and did not subside until three months later.

In the years before the genocide, the economic situation worsened and the president, Juvenal Habyarimana, began losing popularity.

At the same time, Tutsi refugees in Uganda [who had fled there after a series of riots between Hutus and Tutsis in 1959, in which 20,000 Tutsis were killed and many more fled to the neighbouring countries of Burundi, Tanzania and Uganda] – supported by some moderate Hutus – were forming the Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF). Their aim was to overthrow Habyarimana and secure their right to return to their homeland.

Habyarimana chose to exploit this threat as a way to bring dissident Hutus back to his side, and Tutsis inside Rwanda were accused of being RPF collaborators. In August 1993, after several attacks and months of negotiation, a peace accord was signed between Habyarimana and the RPF, but it did little to stop the continued unrest. When Habyarimana's plane was shot down at the beginning of April 1994, it was the final nail in the coffin.

Exactly who killed the president – and with him the president of Burundi and many chief members of staff – has not been established. Whoever was behind the killing, its effect was both instantaneous and catastrophic.

In Kigali, the presidential guard immediately initiated a campaign of retribution. Leaders of the political opposition were murdered, and almost immediately the slaughter of Tutsis and moderate Hutus began.... Soldiers and police officers encouraged ordinary citizens to take part. In some cases, Hutu civilians were forced to murder their Tutsi neighbours by military personnel. Participants were often given incentives such as money or food, and some were even told they could appropriate the land of the Tutsis they killed.

The day after Habyarimana's death, the RPF renewed their assault on government forces, and numerous attempts by the UN to negotiate a ceasefire came to nothing. Finally, in July, the RPF captured Kigali. The government collapsed and the RPF declared a ceasefire. As soon as it became apparent that the RPF was victorious, an estimated two million Hutus fled to Zaire (now the Democratic Republic of the Congo). These refugees include many who have since been implicated in the massacres...

(Source: taken from *BBC News, updated 2004*)

The Tutsi/Hutu conflict has spanned centuries, with both ethnic groups present in Rwanda and Burundi as well as in eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo. Uganda is involved also as its western ethnic groups spill over into eastern DR Congo. Since the start of the current conflict in 1998, Tutsis have been subjected to serious human rights abuses, both in Kinshasa and elsewhere, by government security forces and by some citizens for perceived or potential disloyalty to the regime. By 2001, the government no longer followed a policy of arresting and detaining members of the Tutsi ethnic group without charge and merely on the basis of their ethnicity. Approximately 300 Tutsis who voluntarily entered a government protection site...in Kinshasa remained there at the end of 2001, awaiting resettlement or reintegration into the community. Human rights abuses committed against the Tutsis significantly decreased during 2002 but human rights groups have complained that discrimination against persons perceived to be of Tutsi ethnicity and their supporters has continued....

Former members of the Rwandan army fled to the DRC after the fall of the Hutu-dominated government of Rwanda in 1994 in the wake of the ethnically motivated massacres by the Hutus that left some 800,000 people dead. The former Rwandan military mounted attacks on DRC insurgents opposing the government of President Laurent Kabila.

Rwanda and Uganda had backed Kabila's September 1996 invasion to oust Hutu rebels who had fled to Congo after Rwanda's 1994 genocide. Rwanda believed the Hutus were planning another slaughter and felt Mobutu was not doing enough to stop them. In 1998, Rwanda and Uganda invaded Congo again, sparking a five-year war that sucked in six African armies.

The war began on 2 August 1998, when Laurent Kabila tried to expel Rwandan military forces that had helped him overthrow Mobutu. Congolese Tutsis, as well as the governments of Burundi, Rwanda and Uganda, all relied on the Rwandan military presence for protection against the hostile non-governmental armed groups operating from the eastern part of the country.

A few months later, another front was opened in the North-east of the DRC. Zimbabwe, Angola, Chad and Namibia deployed their troops in the DRC to join forces with the loyalist army, while Rwanda, Uganda and Burundi sponsored the different rebel movements (the Congolese Rally for Democracy and the Movement for the Liberation of the Congo) with a view to toppling Kabila.

By the end of 1998, the government had lost control of more than one-third of the country's territory to the rebel organization, the Congolese Rally for Democracy (RCD), dominated by members of the Tutsi ethnic minority.

During the civil war in August 1998, elements of the armed forces of Burundi, Rwanda and Uganda operated inside the country in support of the rebels; elements of the armed forces of Angola, Chad, Namibia and Zimbabwe operated inside the country in support of the government; and non-governmental armed groups operated inside the country on the side of the government, often as guerrillas inside RCD-occupied territory. Uganda sought to stop attacks by rebels sponsored by Sudan and operating through eastern Congo, while Rwanda and Burundi were out to stop the incursion of Hutu insurgents into their territories. None of the three countries felt inclined to back a ceasefire agreement that did not address their border security concerns.

On 21 August 1999, all elements of the Congo's rebel forces signed the Lusaka peace agreement. The ceasefire was part of a Zambia-brokered agreement reached on 10 July by the six nations involved: DRC, Zimbabwe, Angola, Namibia, Uganda and Rwanda....Under the Lusaka agreement, a regional multi-national force would be comprised of troops from belligerent and possibly non-belligerent countries and would be controlled by a regional Joint Military Commission (JMC) consisting of belligerent nations and established by the Lusaka agreement to work out mechanisms for the tracking, cantoning and documenting of all armed groups in the DRC, especially those forces identified with the 1994 Rwandan genocide. The JMC force would be in addition to the agreement-implementing group of up to 90 military liaison officers the UN Security Council was deploying in the DRC, Lusaka, and the warring capitals to help in implementing the Lusaka ceasefire agreement.

Each side in the conflict repeatedly accused the other of violating the Lusaka Accord, which seemed to exist only on paper. By late December 1999, the deteriorating military and security situation suggested that the slightest incident could trigger large-scale organized attacks against civilians, especially ethnic Tutsis.

In June 2000, the President of the UN Security Council requested the UN Secretary-General to establish a panel of experts on the illegal exploitation of the natural resources and other forms of wealth of the Democratic Republic of the Congo... and to analyse the links between the exploitation of the natural resources and other forms of wealth in the DRC and the continuation of the conflict....

Congo's civil war officially ended in 2002...but the peace process has come to a halt, largely because of the presence of armed groups in the east. Fears of renewed hostilities were raised in November 2004 by threats from Rwanda to send its army into Congo to hunt down Hutu rebels based in the east.

By early December 2004, rival units within the DRC's supposedly unified national army clashed in the eastern part of the country. Reports reaching the capital, Kinshasa, suggested heavy fighting broke out on 12 December 2004, just south of the border town of Goma [in North Kivu province]. The fighting was probably a continuation of in-fighting between elements of a local militia known as the Mai Mai, which has officially been integrated into the newly unified Congolese army.

In May 2005, it was reported that Rwandan Hutu rebels based in eastern Congo were responsible for hundreds of summary executions, rapes, beatings and hostage-taking of Congolese civilians in the territory of Walungu, South Kivu Province.

(Source: taken from *GlobalSecurity.org*)

The Republic of Guinea (National name: République de Guinée)

Guinea, in West Africa on the Atlantic, is also bordered by Guinea-Bissau, Senegal, Mali, Côte d'Ivoire, Liberia and Sierra Leone. It has a population (2006 estimation) of 9,690,222, of which 40% are Peuhl, 30% are Malinke, 20% are Susu, and 10% are from smaller tribes. The capital, Conakry, has a population (2003 estimation) of 1,767,200. French is the official language in Guinea but local languages, including Malinke, Susu and Fulani are also spoken. The majority of the population, 85%, are Muslims, while 8% are Christian and 7% follow indigenous religions.

Guinea achieved independence from France on 2nd October 1958 and became an independent state with Sékou Touré as President. Under Touré, the country was the first avowedly Marxist state in Africa. Diplomatic relations with France were suspended in 1965, with the Soviet Union replacing France as the country's chief source of economic and technical assistance.

Prosperity came in 1960 after the start of exploitation of bauxite deposits. Touré was re-elected to a seven-year term in 1974 and again in 1981. He died after 26 years as President in March 1984. A week later, a military regime headed by Colonel Lansana Conté took power.

In 1989, President Conté announced that Guinea would move to a multi-party democracy, and in 1991, voters approved a new constitution. In December 1993 elections, the President's Unity and Progress Party took almost 51% of the vote. In 2001, a government referendum was passed that eliminated presidential term limits, thus allowing Conté to run for a third term in 2003. Despite the trappings of multi-party rule, Conté has ruled the country with an iron fist.

(Source: *Infoplease*)

The Party of Unity and Progress (PUP) holds the presidency and is the largest party in the National Assembly. On 9th July 1996, President Conté announced the creation of the post of Prime Minister, naming Sidya Touré as the first holder of the post. On 12th March 1999, he appointed Lamine Sidime as Prime Minister.

(Source: taken from *Cambridge International Reference on Current Affairs*)

In December 1993, Conté was elected to a five-year term as president in the country's first multi-party elections, which were marred by irregularities and lack of transparency on the part of the government. In 1995, Conté's ruling PUP party won 76 of 114 seats in elections for the National Assembly amid opposition claims of irregularities and government tampering. In 1996, President Conté reorganised the government, appointing Sidya Touré to the revived post of Prime Minister and charging him with special responsibility for leading the government's economic reform programme.

(Source: taken from *Wikipedia, the free encyclopaedia*)

Charges over Guinea 'coup plot'

Guinea opposition leader Sidya Touré has been charged with plotting to stage a coup, his lawyer has said.

The former prime minister was detained on Monday and freed on bail after being charged, the lawyer said.

Senior army official Colonel Mamadou Camara was also reportedly charged.

President Lansana Conté, who seized power in a coup in 1984, was re-elected with more than 90% of the vote in December's polls, which were boycotted by the opposition.

Mr Touré and Col Camara had to surrender their passports before being freed, said defence lawyer Christian Sow.

Last week, Security Minister Moussa Sampil announced on national television that members of Mr Touré's Union of Republican Forces (UFR) party had discussed killing Mr Conté and dissolving the country's government at a meeting on 10th March 2006.

Mr Touré told the Associated Press news agency that he was not at the meeting and he denied any knowledge of the alleged assassination plot.

Senior officials of Mr Touré's party were arrested earlier this month for allegedly plotting a coup.

The International Federation of Human Rights Leagues (FIDH) has branded the government in Guinea as a sham democracy, denouncing widespread rights abuses in the country.

The human rights group criticised the systematic repression of opposition parties, barriers to freedom of expression, a culture of impunity, and discrimination against women.

(Source: *BBC News, 28th April 2004*)

Guinea: Former prime minister cleared of plotting to overthrow president

CONAKRY, 22 July 2004. Former Guinean Prime Minister Sidyia Touré has been cleared of plotting to overthrow the government by an appeal court judge, three months after the charges were first laid against him.

Touré, who now heads the Union of Republican Forces (UFR) opposition party, had been accused of hatching the alleged plot in a Paris restaurant earlier this year, along with several other leading members of his party.

The group were never brought to trial, but the appeal court struck out the charges against them on Wednesday, clearing the way for Touré and his colleagues to resume a normal life.

'This decision not only vindicates me, but it also goes to show that all of this is part of the government's plan to wreck my political career,' Touré told IRIN.

During the three months that Touré was under investigation, he was barred from talking to the press, holding public meetings and leaving the country. These restrictions have now been lifted.

'The timing of this victory is good because it gives me a platform to say my piece, given the particularly difficult situation our country is going through at this time,' the former prime minister said.

'I believe with this pronouncement, I have now totally regained my freedom....' he added.

The authorities' decision to drop charges against Touré followed the start of fresh negotiations between the government and the European Commission this week on the release of a 221 million Euro package of EU aid for Guinea which has been held up for several years.

The EU is demanding economic and political reforms to establish better governance and genuine democracy before releasing the money, but no decision is likely until October.

Touré served as Prime Minister between 1996 and 1999. He was drafted into the government as a politically independent economist to set the country on a new path of political and economic reform after Conté survived a coup attempt by rebel soldiers who burned down the presidential palace.

Most Guineans remember Touré's time in office as a period of relative economic prosperity and he is now widely regarded as the most popular leader in the opposition movement.

Touré lamented the present state of Guinea's economy, saying 'the powers that be are concentrating solely on politics and abandoning the people to die of hardship.'

(Source: *IRIN News: UN Office for the Co-ordination of Humanitarian Affairs*)

Guinea: Ruling party wins landslide in pivotal local elections

CONRAKRY, 28 December 2005. More than a week after nationwide municipal elections, regarded by many as a test of Guinea's democracy, the results are finally in and the ruling party looks as strong as ever.

Results were delivered in a marathon three-hour broadcast by the minister in charge of organising the elections, Kirdi Bangouraon, on Tuesday night. The ruling Party of Unity and Progress (PUP) retained the vast majority of the more than 300 ridings, according to his final tally.

The poll was closely watched by the international community, which has been highly critical of Guinea in the past over a perception of corruption and lack of democracy.

The West African nation – one of the world's poorest despite its wealth of water and mineral resources – has a history of polls marred by violence and boycotted by the opposition....

The announcement that the PUP had won 31 out of 38 urban seats and 241 out of 303 rural posts came as little surprise in a country where President Lansana Conté and his party have won every election since he came to power in a 1984 coup.

If the general population appeared relatively unfazed by the news, opposition politicians were quick to denounce the official results of the 18 December vote.

'I cannot imagine how in 2005 a party could score 100 per cent in any election whatsoever,' former Prime Minister and current opposition leader, Sidya Touré, told IRIN, referring to a pair of rural communities where the PUP was attributed 98 and 99 per cent of the vote. 'The results, as far as these elections are concerned, are farcical and totally unacceptable.'

Touré's complaints mirrored those of other opposition leaders who held a joint press conference last week to denounce what they perceived as a massive fraud.

But the PUP responded with a charge of sour grapes, pointing to the presence of 400 neutral observers on the ground to bolster its claims of a free and transparent vote...

In a preliminary report issued last week, the observers from 26 civil society NGOs described the conduct of the polls as essentially peaceful and orderly, despite isolated incidents.

But observers did list a string of procedural problems, including supplies shortages, the use of false identification papers and the improper supervision of voting by election officials....

(Source: *IRIN News: UN Office for the Co-ordination of Humanitarian Affairs*)

The Islamic Republic of Iran (National name: Jomhuri-ye Eslami-ye Iran)

The Islamic Republic of Iran, a Middle Eastern country south of the Caspian Sea and north of the Persian Gulf, shares borders with Iraq, Turkey, Azerbaijan, Turkmenistan, Armenia, Afghanistan and Pakistan. The population (2006 estimation) is 68,688,433. The capital city, Tehran, has a population (2003 estimation) of 7,796,257. The main language is Persian (Farsi) but Turkic, Kurdish, Luri, Balochi, Arabic and Turkish are also spoken. The main ethnic group is Persian (51%) but other ethnic groups include Azerbaijani, Gilaki and Mazandarani, Kurds, Arabs, Lur, Baloch and Turkmen. The main religion is Islam (98% - Shia 89%, Sunni 9%); the remaining 2% are Zoroastrian, Jewish, Christian and Baha'i.

The country's pro-Axis allegiance in World War II led to Anglo-Russian occupation of Iran in 1941 and deposition of the Shah [Reza Shah Pahlavi] in favour of his son, Mohammed Reza Pahlavi. Pahlavi's Westernisation programmes alienated the clergy, and his authoritarian rule led to massive demonstrations during the 1970s, to which the Shah responded with the imposition of martial law in September 1978. The Shah and his family fled Iran on 16 January 1979, and the exiled cleric Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini returned to establish an Islamic theocracy. Khomeini proceeded with his plans for revitalising Islamic traditions. He urged women to return to the veil; banned alcohol, Western music, and mixed bathing; shut down the media; closed universities; and eliminated political parties...

The sporadic war with Iraq regained momentum in 1982, as Iran launched an offensive in March and regained much of the border area occupied by Iraq in late 1980. The stalemate war dragged on well into 1988... On 20 July, Khomeini, after a series of Iranian military reverses, agreed to ceasefire negotiations with Iraq. A ceasefire went into effect on 20 August 1988. Khomeini died in June 1989 and Ayatollah Ali Khamenei succeeded him as the supreme leader.

By early 1991 the Islamic revolution appeared to have lost much of its militancy. Attempting to revive a stagnant economy, President Rafsanjani took measures to decentralise the command system and introduce free-market mechanisms.

Mohammed Khatami, a little-known moderate cleric, former newspaperman, and national librarian, won the presidential election with 70% of the vote on 23 May 1997... Khatami supported greater social and political freedoms, but his steps towards liberalising the strict clerical rule governing the country put him at odds with the supreme leader, Ayatollah Khamenei... Khatami walked a jittery tightrope between student groups and other liberals pressuring him to introduce bolder freedoms, and Iran's military and conservative clerical elite (including Khamenei), who expressed growing impatience with the president's liberalising measures.

In June 2001 presidential elections, Khatami won re-election with a stunning 77% of vote... Friction between Iran's reformers and conservatives increased in 2002.

Iran cooperated in the fight against global terrorism after the September 11 bombings, assisting its war-torn neighbour Afghanistan in restoring peace. But US president Bush announced in January 2002 that Iran was part of an 'axis of evil', calling it one of the most active sponsors of international terrorism.

By 2003, Iran was fanning much of the world's suspicions that it had illegal nuclear ambitions. In June 2003, the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) criticised Iran's concealment of much of its nuclear facilities and called on the country to permit more rigorous inspections of its nuclear sites. In August 2003, the IAEA found traces of highly enriched uranium in a nuclear facility; in the face of this evidence and intense international pressure, Iran reluctantly agreed in December to suspend its uranium enrichment programme and allow for thorough IAEA inspections...

The IAEA again censured the country in June 2004 for failing to fully cooperate with nuclear inspections. Neither US threats nor Europe's coaxing managed to halt Iran's alarming defiance.

In June 2005, former Tehran mayor Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, a hard-line conservative, won the presidential election with 62% of the vote. It was a surprising defeat for Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, a former president (1989-1997), who had been expected to win. Ahmadinejad was highly popular among Iran's rural poor, who responded to his pledge to fight corruption among the country's elite. Under Ahmadinejad, most international observers expected Iran to take a sharply conservative turn. Unlike his predecessor, Mohammed Khatami, who frequently clashed with the country's supreme leader, Ahmadinejad is a devout follower of Ayatollah Ali Khamenei. In August 2005, he rejected an EU disarmament plan that was backed by the US and had been under negotiation for two years. Ahmadinejad revealed just how extreme his views were when he announced in a venomous screed in October that Israel was a 'disgraceful blot' that should be 'wiped off the map'. He refused to disown his remarks, despite widespread international outrage, further isolating his country.

In January 2006, Iran removed UN seals on uranium enrichment equipment and resumed nuclear research. France, Britain and Germany called off nuclear talks with Iran, and along with the United States, have threatened to refer Iran to the UN Security Council, a step avoided thus far. Russia and China, both of whom have strong economic ties to Iran, have both refused to endorse sanctions. In April, Iran announced it had successfully enriched uranium. In April, the US dismissed media reports that the US was actively planning to attack Iranian nuclear facilities as 'wild speculation'. After persuasion by Britain, France and Germany, the three countries that have most tenaciously negotiated with Iran over its nuclear programme, the US struck a more conciliatory note toward Iran at the end of May, announcing it would hold direct talks with Iran (the first official talks in 27 years) as long as the country suspended its enrichment of uranium.

(Source: *Infoplease*)

Respect for basic rights in Iran, especially freedom of expression and opinion, deteriorated considerably in 2005. The government routinely uses torture and ill-treatment in detention, including prolonged solitary confinement, to punish dissidents. The judiciary, which is accountable to Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei, has been at the centre of many serious human rights violations. Abuses are perpetrated by what Iranians call 'parallel institutions': paramilitary groups and plainclothes intelligence agents violently attack peaceful protesters, and intelligence services run illegal secret prisons and interrogation centres. President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, elected in June 2005, appointed a cabinet dominated by former members of the intelligence and security forces, some of whom are allegedly implicated in the most serious human rights violations since the Islamic Republic of Iran was established 26 years ago, such as the assassination of dissident intellectuals.

The Iranian authorities have systematically suppressed freedom of expression and opinion since April 2000, when the government launched a campaign involving closure of newspapers and the imprisonment of journalists and editors. Consequently, very few independent dailies remain, and those that do self-censor heavily. Many writers and intellectuals have left the country, are in prison, or have ceased to be critical. During 2005 the authorities also targeted websites and internet journalists in an effort to prevent online dissemination of news and information...The government systematically blocks websites with political news and analysis from inside Iran and abroad...On 2 February 2005, a court in the province of Gilan sentenced Arash Sigarchi to 14 years in prison for his online writings...

With the closure of independent newspapers and journals and the suppression of reporting on human rights abuses, treatment of detainees has worsened in Evin Prison as well as in detention centres operated clandestinely by the judiciary and the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps. The authorities have subjected those imprisoned for peaceful expression of their political views to torture and ill-treatment. Judges often accept coerced confessions. The authorities use prolonged solitary confinement, often in small basement cells, to coerce confessions (which are videotaped) and gain information regarding associates. Combined with denial of access to counsel, prolonged solitary confinement creates an environment in which prisoners have nowhere to turn to seek redress for their treatment in detention...

There is no mechanism for monitoring and investigating human rights violations perpetrated by agents of the government. The closure of independent media in Iran has helped to perpetuate an atmosphere of impunity....

(Source: taken from *Human Rights Watch Report 2005*)

The Islamic Republic of Iran, with a population of approximately 68 million, is a constitutional theocratic republic in which Shi'a Muslim clergy dominate the key power structures. Article four of the constitution states that 'All laws and regulations...shall be based on Islamic principles'....

The supreme leader of the Islamic Revolution, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, dominated a tricameral division of power among legislative, executive and judicial branches. He is not directly elected but chosen by an elected body of religious leaders. Khamenei directly controlled the armed forces and exercised indirect control over the internal security forces, the judiciary, and other key institutions. Reformist President Mohammed Khatami headed the executive branch until August when conservative Mahmoud Ahmadinejad took office. Ahmadinejad won the presidency in June in an election widely viewed as neither free nor fair...

The government's poor human rights record worsened, and it continued to commit numerous serious abuses. On December 16, the UN General Assembly passed a resolution expressing detailed serious concerns over the country's human rights problems.

In preparation for the June presidential elections, there was an intense political struggle between a broad popular movement favouring greater liberalisation of human rights and the economy, and hard-line elements within government and society that viewed such reforms as a threat to the Islamic Republic. Reformists and hard-liners within the government engaged in divisive internal debates.

The following human rights problems were reported:

- o Significant restriction of the rights of citizens to change their government
- o Summary executions, including of minors
- o Disappearances
- o Torture and severe punishments such as amputations and flogging
- o Violence by vigilante groups with ties to the government
- o Poor prison conditions
- o Arbitrary arrest and detention, including prolonged solitary confinement
- o Lack of judicial independence
- o Lack of fair public trials, including lack of due process and access to counsel
- o Political prisoners and detainees
- o Excessive government violence in Kurdish areas
- o Substantial increase in violence from unknown groups in Arab region of the country
- o Severe restrictions on civil liberties – speech, press, assembly, association, movement, and privacy
- o Severe restrictions on freedom of religion
- o Official corruption
- o Lack of government transparency
- o Violence and legal societal discrimination against women, ethnic and religious minorities, and homosexuals
- o Trafficking in persons
- o Incitement to anti-Semitism
- o Severe restriction of workers' rights, including freedom of association and the right to organise and bargain collectively
- o Child labour

There were reports of political killings. The government was responsible for numerous killings during the year, including executions following trials that lacked due process. Exiles and human rights monitors alleged that many of those supposedly executed for criminal offences, such as narcotics trafficking, actually were political dissidents.

The law criminalised dissent and applied the death penalty to offences such as apostasy, 'attempts against the security of the State, outrage against high-ranking officials, and insults against the memory of Imam Khomeini and against the Supreme Leader of the Islamic Republic'.

On April 15, there were violent protests in the ethnically Arab province of Khuzestan. The protests followed publication of a letter (denounced as a forgery by the government) that allegedly discussed government policies to reduce the percentage of ethnic Arabs in the province. A government official said clashes with security services resulted in three or four deaths, but Human Rights Watch reported at least 50 deaths.

On June 12, four bombs exploded in Khuzestan and two in Tehran, with as many as 10 killed and approximately 100 injured.

In July and August, demonstrations and strikes in Kurdistan followed the killing of a Kurdish political activist by security forces. According to Human Rights Watch, security forces killed at least 17 persons during this period...

Little reliable information was available regarding the number of disappearances during the year.

According to Internet press reports, Massoumeh Babapour, a journalist for Tabriz newspapers and activist for Azeri rights, disappeared on October 3. She was found stabbed nine times, but still alive. According to her husband, she had received death threats calling her an atheist and claiming religious authorities passed a death sentence on her. At year's end there was no information regarding the perpetrators.

According to a report during the year, over the past 15 years there have been reports of at least eight evangelical Christians being killed in Iran, and between 15 and 23 reportedly missing or 'disappeared'....

Some prison facilities, including Tehran's Evin Prison, were notorious for the cruel and prolonged torture of political opponents of the government. Additionally, in recent years authorities have severely abused and tortured prisoners in a series of 'unofficial' secret prisons and detention centres outside the national prison system. Common methods included prolonged solitary confinement with sensory deprivation, beatings, long confinement in contorted positions, kicking detainees with military boots, hanging detainees by the arms and legs, threats of execution if individuals refused to confess, burning with cigarettes, sleep deprivation, and severe and repeated beatings with cables or other instruments on the back and on the soles of the feet. Prisoners also reported beatings about the ears, inducing partial or complete deafness, and punching in the eyes, leading to partial or complete blindness. Human Rights Watch noted that student activists were physically tortured more than critics within the system....

In February 2004, Amnesty International reported that it had documented evidence of 'white torture', a form of sensory deprivation. Amir Abbas Fakhrafar, a political prisoner, was sent to the '125' detention centre, controlled by the revolutionary guards. According to Amnesty International, his cell had no windows, and the walls and his clothes were white. His meals consisted of white rice on white plates. To use the toilet, he had to put a white piece of paper under the door. He was forbidden to speak, and the guards reportedly wore shoes that muffled sound. The Committee against Torture has found that sensory deprivation amounts to torture....

In July according to domestic press, the deputy national police commander for criminal investigation said police would investigate any reports of torture. He said torture was against regulations, but its existence in the criminal investigation departments was undeniable, and that forensic and scientific advances have made torture unnecessary.

In an effort to combat 'un-Islamic behaviour' and social corruption among the young, the government relied on a 'morality' force, referred to merely as 'special units', to complement the existing morality police... The new force was to assist in enforcing the Islamic Republic's strict rules of moral behaviour. Credible press reports indicated that members of this force chased and beat persons in the streets for offences such as listening to music or, in the case of women, wearing make-up or clothing regarded as insufficiently modest, or being accompanied by unrelated men.

(Source: taken from *US Department of State Country Report on Human Rights Practices 2005*)

Basij (or **Baseej**) is an Iranian paramilitary force that was founded by Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini in November 1979 to provide volunteers for shock troop units in the Iran-Iraq War. The Basij are currently a branch of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps.

Basij commander Brigadier General Mohammed Hejazi estimated the number of Basij personnel at 10.3 million in March 2004 and 11 million in March 2005...

According to the Jordan Institute of Diplomacy and GlobalSecurity.org, they enforce Iran's Islamic codes together with other law enforcement entities and have a branch in almost every Iranian mosque.

The typical member will be male and the average age can range from 12 on up. Members of Basij usually have a couple of months slashed off their compulsory military service, which would last 21 months for every eligible man in Iran. It is easier for the Basijis to obtain university entry due to the fact that government universities have a quota reserved for the Basij, regardless of merit. Numerous benefits and subsidies are provided for them and their families, as social support and activities.

Members of the Basij also have preferential treatment on national transportation. By proving their membership to airline or train staff, they can jump queues and waiting lists and obtain seats before members of the general public.

The Basij have been criticised as belonging to the paramilitary forces using child soldiers because of their underage recruitment practices and for having relied extensively on 'human wave' attacks during the Iran-Iraq War, particularly around Basra.

Following the UNHCR 'tens of thousands of Basijis have been ordered to prowl about every factory, office and school to ensure that everyone adhered to the Islamic code... After the summer 1992 riots Basij units were revived, re-armed and sent out into the streets to help enforce Islamic law. The Basijis are reportedly under the control of local mosques. It was further said that the Basijis set up checkpoints around the cities and stopped cars to sniff their occupants' breath for alcohol and check for women wearing make-up or travelling with a man not their close relative or husband. It was reported that the Law of Judicial Support for the Basijis, published in the official Gazette.... (December 1992), provided no redress against arbitrary detention by the Basijis.' Iran's permanent representative to the UN denied these charges.

Amnesty International tells that 'investigations by Parliament and the National Security Council indicated that actions by Revolutionary Guard officials and Basij (Mobilisation) forces, among others, precipitated the unrest and injuries following the July 1999 student demonstrations.'

In 2001, a member of the Basij, Saeed Asgar, attempted to assassinate Saeed Hajjaran, a leading reformist and political advisor to reformist Iranian President Mohammad Khatami. Asgar was arrested and sentenced to spend 15 years in jail, but was released after spending only a short term in prison.

Human Rights Watch informs that the Basij belong to the 'Parallel institutions' (*nahad-e movazi*), 'the quasi-official organs of repression that have become increasingly open in crushing student protests, detaining activists, writers and journalists in secret prisons, and threatening pro-democracy speakers and audiences at public events'. Under the control of the Office of the Supreme Leader, these groups set up arbitrary checkpoints around Tehran, uniformed police often refraining from directly confronting these plainclothes agents. 'Illegal prisons, which are outside of the oversight of the National Prisons Office, are sites where political prisoners are abused, intimidated and tortured with impunity.'

On March 8 2004, the Basij issued a violent crackdown on the activists celebrating the International Women's Day in Tehran.

(Source: taken from *Wikipedia, the free encyclopaedia*)

Iran student protests: Five years on

In July 1999 Iran suffered its most serious unrest for years, as students staged demonstrations across the country calling for reform and press freedom.

On 9 July, police and right-wing vigilantes stormed a Tehran University dormitory which students were occupying.

The move sparked off days of street riots across the country, in which students were beaten and detained by police and hardliners. At least five were reportedly killed.

In this account sent to BBC Persian.com, Mohammed Reza Kasrani, a student at the time, recalls the dormitory attack and its ugly aftermath:

"It was Friday evening 9 July when a friend told me about the attack on the students' dormitory in Tehran university, which had happened early in the morning. I rushed there. God, it could not be described in any words: walls demolished, students' belongings thrown out through the windows. Even some students who had been sleeping or doing their morning prayers were thrown out through the windows from the second and third floors.

A group of vigilantes, who are called 'plainclothes', had attacked students who the day before were peacefully demonstrating in protest at the closure of a reformist newspaper by the judiciary.

During the five days of the attack, while students staged demonstrations, the 'plainclothes' attacked government buildings and set buses on fire, but it was the students who were later blamed for this vandalism.

The 'plainclothes' attacked the students by sticks and batons and even fired tear gas. Some students, like my friend Mehran Abdulbaqi, were arrested by them and not by the police or security forces. The police treated us harshly but never reacted to the 'plainclothes'. The students tried to avoid any reaction to the 'plainclothes' and just stayed away from them, although some clashes occurred.

The students were not organised and their movement had no leadership, they just acted in an atmosphere filled with emotion and sensitivity. All the students wanted was to bring those who attacked the dormitory to justice but, as the protest and unrest went on, more radical people joined the movement and slogans against the country's leaders were chanted. The unrest was brutally suppressed after five days.

It was on the fifth day that I was arrested by the agents of the intelligence ministry, while standing by the gate of Tehran University. They put me in a cage, which was laid on the back of a pickup truck, and took me to a building which belonged to the police. They took me out of the van when we reached the yard. From there to the door leading into the building soldiers were standing in rows on both sides, which reminded me of a 'corridor of fear'.

Then they beat me and two other students severely. They told us to sit and stand up so many times that our knees were locked and we fell on the ground; they beat us again. Finally, they blindfolded us and took us to a hall inside the building.

They made me sit on a chair. Somebody came and opened my blindfold and showed me a student statement and asked me if I believed in what was said in the text. I said yes. When he left, another one in a commando uniform came in. He beat me hard.

They only kept me one day in that building, and then I was transferred to Evin Prison and, later, a police detention centre for interrogation. In that detention centre, they beat me on the soles of the feet with a cable for four continuous days and I was also subject to psychological torture for a month.

They told us that we would be executed. At one stage, I heard the voices of my parents from another room. They were told that I was going to be executed. Then I heard my mother faint and then my father cried and begged them not to kill me. I heard them say to my parents: 'For this bastard, you should not even read Koran after his death.'

I said to God: 'I am going to be killed for my country's freedom and for my religion, now my parents cannot even mourn for me.'

Later, when I was freed, I found out that they played the recorded voices of my parents from another room. They put me in a situation where I was totally convinced my parents were being tortured.

Before I was arrested, I always believed that we could criticise the Islamic establishment by peaceful dialogue and that the officials would reform the system. But after my arrest, my belief has completely changed. I have reached the conclusion that the officials are not thinking for reforms at all. I think the student movement in Iran is living in a very uncertain situation.

The government has been able to create an atmosphere of terror which has led to the students' frustration. But I believe this phase would be a transitional one. There are signs that the student movement is going to be revived again."

(Source: *BBC News, Friday 9 July, 2004*)

Iran: Akbar Mohammadi's death in custody signals need for justice reform

The death in custody of Akbar Mohammadi, a 38-year-old former student, in the early hours of 31 July 2006 casts a pall over the entire Iranian justice system, Amnesty International said today.

'The series of failures to afford Akbar Mohammadi justice have robbed him of his life and his family of human dignity. There can be no more deaths in Iranian custody. A thorough reform of the criminal justice system is urgently needed,' added the organisation.

'The Iranian authorities need to take urgent measures to ensure that political prisoners are afforded a fair and open trial; that torture and other ill-treatment in Iranian prisons is halted and that the practice of delaying or denying medical care is stopped immediately.'

Amnesty International is alarmed at reports indicating that following an inspection of Akbar Mohammadi's detention conditions by senior officials he was administered a drug which may have resulted not only in his tranquillisation but possibly, as a result of complications, his death.

From around 21 July, Akbar Mohammadi had reportedly undertaken a hunger strike, the last three days of which he refused liquids as well as solids.

Amidst reports that an autopsy had been carried out domestically by the coroner (*pezeshk-e qanouni*), Amnesty International considers that there needs to be an independent investigation and autopsy by fully independent pathologists to determine the cause of Akbar Mohammadi's death and the conditions that facilitated it.

Principle 9 of the UN Principles on the Effective Prevention and Investigation of extra-Legal, Arbitrary and Summary Executions states: 'There shall be thorough, prompt and impartial investigation of all suspected cases of extra-legal, arbitrary and summary executions, including cases where complaints by relatives or other reliable reports suggest unnatural death in the above circumstances [...] The purpose of the investigation shall be to determine the cause, manner and time of death, the person responsible and any pattern or practice which may have brought about that death. It shall include an adequate autopsy, collection and analysis of all physical and documentary evidence and statements from witnesses.'

Amnesty International also expressed concern that political prisoners Heshmatollah Tabarzadi, Ahmad Batebi and Akbar Mohammed's brother Manuchehr are facing heightened risk following this latest death in custody.

Background

Akbar Mohammadi was one of the thousands of students arrested in July 1999 after student demonstrations which erupted following the closure of newspapers and one of the periodic clampdowns on freedom of expression that occurred throughout the late 1990s in Iran.

Akbar Mohammadi and other students were sentenced to death in September 1999 following a manifestly unfair trial. He was brutally tortured while in incómmunicado in detention, denied the right of legal representation and access to family. Following domestic and international outcry, in November 1999 the sentences were commuted to 15 years' imprisonment.

From the day of his arrest, Akbar Mohammadi was routinely tortured. While in the custody of the Ministry of Intelligence, he was allegedly suspended by his arms, and violently beaten. Guards beat him to the edge of consciousness, telling him that all he had to do was blink to accept the charges against him.

The information available strongly indicates that the repeated delays or outright denials of adequate medical care by Iran's judicial and prison authorities have contributed to his death in custody. At the end of November 2003, for example, judicial authorities permitted his hospitalisation in response to urgent stomach and kidney problems, internal bleeding and possibly a lung infection. Despite medical advice that he be hospitalised for one month, he was returned to Evin Prison one week later.

Between July 2004 and June 2006, Akbar Mohammadi resided at his family home in Amol, northern Iran, where he received medical treatment and wrote a prison memoir. He was re-arrested on 11 June 2006 and returned to Evin Prison where, once again, he was denied the right to meet with his family. Following one visit by his lawyer, Akbar Mohammadi was said to be in ill health and suffering from acute abdominal pain. Prison medical staff reportedly advised that he should be removed from prison for medical treatment.

According to sources inside Evin prison, he sought medical care from around 26 July during his hunger strike but he was chastised by medical officers who rejected his request. Between 26 and 29 July, he was reportedly provided unspecified treatment, though an Iranian parliamentary delegation visiting Evin prison was denied permission to visit the section of the prison – possibly the clinic itself – in which he was held.

On or around 29-30 July he was reportedly gagged and bound to a bed while senior officials visited the prison. The Chief Prosecutor for the province of Tehran, Said Mortazavi, and two senior prison officials, along with a prison guard reportedly inspected him on 30 July, during which time he was administered an unspecified 'medicine'. His condition reportedly worsened in the course of that day and he died on 31 July. Despite the call by his lawyer that his body be examined by an independent team of pathologists, his body was transferred to a coroner on 31 July.

Akbar Mohammadi's parents arrived at Imam Khomeini Airport in Tehran on Tuesday 1 August 2006, at 0230 local time, from a visit outside the country. They were forcibly taken directly from the aircraft to awaiting vehicles and driven directly to their house in Amol, northern Iran. They were denied permission to see the body of their deceased son, as was his brother Manuchehr, who remains in Evin prison. At the time of writing, there are reports that the body of Akbar Mohammadi has been buried.

(Source: *Amnesty International Press Release, 1 August 2006*)

Iran: Imprisoned Dissident Dies in Custody

The Iranian government should immediately allow an independent investigation into the suspicious death in prison of student activist Akbar Mohammadi, Human Rights Watch said today. Human Rights Watch said that if responsibility for Mohammadi's death in Tehran's Evin prison on July 30 lies with the prison or other state authorities, the relevant individuals should be identified and prosecuted.

Mohammadi, 38, is the second inmate to die in the notorious Evin prison in the past three years. In June 2003, Zahra Kazemi, a Canadian-Iranian photojournalist, died while in custody there. Iranian authorities arrested her as she was photographing Evin prison. A few days later, Kazemi fell into a coma and died. According to lawyers for Kazemi's family, her body showed signs of torture. The Iranian authorities have not charged anyone in connection with her death.

'Every death in custody must be investigated,' said Sarah Leah Whitson, director of the Middle East and North Africa division of Human Rights Watch. 'But the failure to prosecute anyone of Kazemi's death underlines the need for an independent inquiry into Mohammadi's death.'

Human Rights Watch called for an independent commission comprised of Iranian lawyers and medical experts to investigate and report publicly on the circumstances resulting in Mohammadi's death. Human Rights Watch also expressed its serious concern for the health and safety of other prisoners held for their political beliefs inside Iran's prisons.

The authorities arrested Mohammadi in 1999 following his participation in student protests at Tehran University. He was originally sentenced to death in September 1999 but his sentence was commuted to 15 years in prison....

Several sources told Human Rights Watch that after his arrest in 1999 Mohammadi was severely tortured and ill-treated, leading to serious health problems.

Ali Afshari, a student leader, was imprisoned in the same wing as Mohammadi in Evin prison from March 2002 to October 2003. Afshari told Human Rights Watch that Mohammadi told him in detail of his torture and beatings. Another former detainee, who was also imprisoned with Mohammadi in Evin prison, and knew him well, confirmed that Mohammadi had been badly tortured and that his health had deteriorated.

Mohammadi's brother, Reza Mohammadi, also stated that interrogators severely tortured Mohammadi after his arrest in 1999. 'He was healthy before his arrest in 1999, but during his detention he developed several complications, including internal bleeding, injury to his spinal cord and lung infection,' Reza Mohammadi told Human Rights Watch.

In July 2004, government medical authorities determined that Mohammadi's continued imprisonment endangered his health and that he required immediate medical attention. In July 2004, Mohammadi was released on an indefinite medical leave and reportedly underwent at least three major operations. He was receiving medical treatment in his home town of Amol until June 2006.

On June 11, security agents re-arrested Mohammadi in his home without any warning and put him in Evin prison. The authorities did not provide any reason for his arrest. Mohammadi's lawyer, Khalil Bahramian, was informed that Mohammadi went on hunger strike on July 25 to protest his return to prison...

On Monday, July 31, Justice Minister Jamal Karimirad confirmed Mohammadi's death in custody. He told reporters that 'before his death, this prisoner [Mohammadi] was under medical supervision in the prison's medical clinic and he had stated that he is in good health.' He added, 'Ultimately, we must await the autopsy report by the coroner's office.'

On the same day, the director of prisons, Sohrab Soleimani, said, 'Last night Mohammadi's condition deteriorated and he was receiving medical treatment, but he insisted to be returned to his cell. Upon his return, his condition worsened again and he passed away while being transferred back to the clinic.'

Soleimani, who had earlier denied the reports, also confirmed that Mohammadi had been on hunger strike since July 25 and was consuming only water and tea. On July 25, when news agencies reported Mohammadi's hunger strike, Soleimani said, 'I absolutely deny this news - Akbar Mohammadi is not on hunger strike.'

'Iran's judiciary is responsible for Mohammadi's arrest, his torture and now his death in custody,' said Whitson. 'Only an independent investigation can establish how he died, and whether he was tortured, beaten or force-fed. Someone must be held accountable for Mohammadi's death.'

(Source: *Human Rights News, August 3 2006*)

Christianity in Iran

Christianity in Iran has had a long history. It has always been a minority religion, overshadowed by the majority state religions - Zoroastrianism in the past, and Shia Islam today....

A number of Christian denominations are represented in Iran. The main Christian churches are:

- Armenian Apostolic Church of Iran.
- Assyrian Church of the East of Iran.
- Chaldean Catholic Church of Iran.
- Various Protestant denominations, the most important of which are:
 - Presbyterian, including the Assyrian Evangelical Church;
 - Jamiat-e Rabbani (the Iranian Assemblies of God churches);
 - Anglican Church of Iran.

(Source: *Wikipedia*)

The constitution claims that Islam is the official religion, in particular the Ja'fari Shi'ism sect of Islam. Other sects of Islam and other religious minorities are under multiple restrictions.

Members of Christianity, Zoroastrianism and Judaism are considered protected minorities and are allowed to elect representatives to fill reserved parliamentary seats.

While members of religious minorities are supposedly granted the freedom to practise their religion and instruct their children, government interference with school administration and government harassment is common.

All activities of religious minorities are monitored by the Ministry of Islamic Guidance.

Laws stipulate penalties for government workers who don't follow Islamic principles and rules.

The printing of Christian literature, including church bulletins and church newsletters, is prohibited.

Non-Muslims are not allowed to proselytize. Muslims who convert are considered apostate and are subject to the death penalty.

Most evangelical churches have been closed or have been restricted to only conducting services in Armenian and Assyrian. As a result, many churches have gone underground. The government is actively seeking out these underground churches and punishes all those involved.

Many pastors report being under constant surveillance. Many are also pressured into signing documents that say they will not proselytize to Muslims or allow them to attend church services.

(Source: International Christian Concern)

The persecution of Christians in Iran

The persecution of Christians in Iran today is not a series of isolated events or the result of individual prejudices but rather a state policy implemented at all levels in various forms. It affects both individuals as well as the church as a whole.

Under the present Islamic regime, Christians and their institutions are intensely regulated, and subjected to intrusive questioning through the management of more than three Ministries and their Departments: the Ministry of Information and Islamic Guidance, the Ministry of Religious Affairs and Endowments, the Ministry of the Interior and its notorious State Secret Police...

The continued existence of the church in Iran today is at grave risk. This is due to the fact that the Islamic regime appears to have adopted a deliberate policy of gradual eradication of existing churches under legal pretences.

The following churches have been forced to close by the Iranian regime: A building in Kernan and another in Ahwaz, both used by the Anglican and Presbyterian congregations in those cities, and the Assemblies of God Church in Gorgan... Various church house-groups have also been closed down in Sari and Mashad and Ahwaz and the Christians there are strictly forbidden to meet...

Despite all denials at the official level the Law of Apostasy is practised and remains in force. It is under this law that converts from Islam to other religions are subject to capital punishment.

Some examples of the application of this law are as follows:

In 1989, Rev Hossein Soodmand was executed for apostasy. Although born a Muslim, by 1989, Hossein had been a Christian for 25 years. He was an evangelist and the pastor of the Assemblies of God (AOG) in Mashad. Despite pleas for clemency by fellow pastors to the *Dayro-E-Tasalamat* (an Ombudsman and Muslim cleric...), Hossein was hanged on 3rd December 1989 at the insistence of the Ombudsman. He left a blind wife and four children.

Mehdi Dibaj, a Muslim convert to Christianity, was in prison for nine years. During that time, he endured two years in solitary confinement and was subjected to mock execution. He was imprisoned by the Sharia court in Sari on three charges: 1. That he had 'insulted Islam, the prophet Muhammad and Ayatollah Khomeini' in a letter; 2. That he was acting as a spy for the West; and 3. That he was an apostate.

Iran's Supreme Court on two occasions dismissed the first charge on grounds that the letter was not proved to be in Dibaj's handwriting and the second charge as unfounded. He continued to remain in prison solely on grounds of apostasy. In 1994, he was sentenced to death for apostasy and only after an international campaign for his release was he allowed out of prison on 16th January 1995.

The torture and murder of Bishop Haik Hovsepian Mehr, the leading figure of the Protestant community in Iran, took place almost immediately after he had worked for the release of Mehdi Dibaj. The Iranian authorities had many reasons for wanting to kill Haik...He had refused to comply with directives restricting church worship and membership. He had also been active in the campaign for the release of Mehdi Dibaj. Furthermore, in 1993 Haik had publicly appealed to the United Nations to investigate the countless and dreadful abuses of human rights against Christians in Iran.

Bishop Haik disappeared on Wednesday 19th January 1994. Eleven days later his family were informed by the Tehran Office of Investigation that his body had been found on 20th January and, in absence of identification, he had been buried in Beheshte Zahra (Muslim) cemetery. The only explanation to emerge from the authorities is that Bishop Haik was killed by 'unknown assailants'.

Mehdi Dibaj was last seen alive six months later on 24th June. On that day, he left a Christian retreat which was held in Karaj. He was travelling alone to Tehran. According to a press release by the official Islamic Republic News Agency on 5th July, his body was found by police buried in a forested area of the capital and he had been stabbed to death. However, independent sources add that rope burns around his neck indicated that he could also have been hung or strangled.

After Bishop Haik's death, Tateos Michaelian, the senior pastor of St John's Armenian Evangelical (Presbyterian) church, succeeded him as Chairman of the Council of Protestant Ministers.

Michaelian was last seen alive leaving his home in Tehran during the afternoon of 29th June in response to a telephone call. The call apparently came from his self-confessed assassin, Farahnaz Anami (female) who had, on earlier occasions, attended his church professing an interest in Christianity. According to official reports, his body was found inside a freezer in a private house in Majidiyeh rented by Anami and she, allegedly, implicated at least one other female accomplice to the murder. The cause of death was multiple gunshot wounds to the head. Members of his family positively identified the body at the public morgue on 2nd July.

Middle East Concern [a network of concerned Christians involved in assisting the Church in the Middle East and North Africa when it faces discrimination and persecution] reports that its sources have revealed that Tateos's body had in fact been dismembered and that a copy of a 'hit list' of Christians was found with his body. This document is now in the possession of a western government agency. MEC's sources, who have access to high-level government contacts, categorically state that they believe that all three murders of the Christian leaders were carried out by a death-squad operating within the Iranian security structures and sanctioned by orders from the highest political levels. They further believe that Anami (if she was the killer) is, in fact, a government agent and not a member of the MKO (Mujahedin Khalq Organisation, an armed group attempting to overthrow the Iranian regime) as the authorities allege....

The persecution of Christians in Iran has decimated the leadership of the Protestant evangelical community in that country and created an atmosphere of terror under which the church is presently suffering. The evidence points to a deliberate campaign of persecution against the church in Iran, orchestrated at the highest political levels.

(Source: Jubilee Campaign, a UK human rights pressure group lobbying to protect the persecuted church)

Iraq (National name: Al Jumhuriyah al Iraqiyah)

Iraq, a triangle of mountains, desert and fertile river valley, is bounded on the east by Iran, on the north by Turkey, on the west by Syria and Jordan, and on the south by Saudi Arabia and Kuwait. The capital is Baghdad, which has an overall population (2003 estimation) of 6,777,300. The largest cities outside Baghdad are Mosul (pop. 1,791,600); Basra (1,377,000); Irbil (864,900), [Suleimaniya (757,300); and Kirkuk (755,700). The population of the country as a whole (2006 estimation) is 26,783,383, of which 75% – 80% are Arab, 15% – 20% are Kurdish, and 5% are Turkoman, Assyrian or from other ethnic groups. Languages spoken are Arabic (official), Kurdish (official in Kurdish regions), Assyrian and Armenian. Religions are Islam (Shia 60% - 65%, Sunni 32% - 37%), Christian or other 3%.

Iraq was a monarchy until 1958 when King Faisal II and his uncle, Crown Prince Abdul-Illah, were assassinated in a revolutionary coup that brought to power a military junta headed by Abdul Karem Kassim. Kassim was overthrown and killed in a coup staged on 8th March 1963 by the military and the Ba'ath Socialist Party. The Ba'ath Party advocated secularism, pan-Arabism, and socialism. The following year, the new leader, Abdel Salam Arif, consolidated his power by driving out the Ba'ath Party. He adopted a new constitution in 1964. In 1966, he died in a helicopter crash. His brother, Gen Abdel Rahman Arif, assumed the presidency, crushed the opposition, and won an indefinite extension of his term in 1967.

Arif's regime was ousted in July 1968 by a junta led by Maj Gen Ahmed Hassan al-Bakr of the Ba'ath Party. Bakr's second-in-command was Saddam Hussein. On 16th July 1979, President Bakr was succeeded by Saddam Hussein, whose regime steadily developed an international reputation for repression, human rights abuses, and terrorism.

In July 1990, Saddam Hussein asserted spurious territorial claims on Kuwaiti land. A mediation attempt by Arab leaders failed, and on 2nd August 1990, Iraqi troops invaded Kuwait and set up a puppet government. The UN unsuccessfully imposed trade sanctions against Iraq to pressure it to withdraw. On 18th January 1991, UN forces, under the leadership of US general Norman Schwarzkopf, launched the Gulf War (Operation Desert Storm), liberating Kuwait....

The war did little to dwarf Iraq's resilient dictator. Rebellions by both Shias and Kurds, encouraged by the US, were brutally crushed. In 1991, the UN set up a northern no-fly zone to protect Iraq's Kurdish population; in 1992, a southern no-fly zone was established as a buffer between Iraq and Kuwait and to protect Shias in the south.

The UN Security Council imposed sanctions beginning in 1990 that barred Iraq from selling oil except in exchange for food and medicine. The sanctions against Iraq failed to crush its leader but caused catastrophic suffering among its people – the country's infrastructure was in ruins, and disease, malnutrition and the infant mortality rate skyrocketed.

The UN weapons inspection team mandate to ascertain that Iraq had destroyed all its nuclear, chemical, biological, and ballistic arms after the war was consistently thwarted by Saddam Hussein. On 16th December 1998, the United States and Britain began Operation Desert Fox, four days of intensive air strikes. From then on, the US and Britain conducted hundreds of strikes on Iraqi targets within the no-fly zones. The sustained low-level warfare continued unabated into 2003.

After the September 11th terrorist attacks, President Bush began calling for a 'regime change' in Iraq, describing the nation as part of an 'axis of evil'. The alleged existence of weapons of mass destruction, the thwarting of UN weapons inspections, Iraq's alleged links to terrorism, and Saddam Hussein's despotism and human rights abuses were the major reasons cited for necessitating a pre-emptive strike against the country. The Arab world and much of Europe condemned the hawkish and unilateral US stance. The UK, however, declared its intention to support the US in military action....

On 20th March 2003, the war against Iraq began with the launch of Operation Iraqi Freedom. By 9th April, US forces took control of the capital, signalling the collapse of Saddam Hussein's regime. Although the war had been declared over on 1st May 2003, Iraq remained enveloped in violence and chaos. Iraqis began protesting almost immediately against the delay in self rule and the absence of a timetable to end the US occupation.....

Continued instability in 2003 kept 140,000 American troops, as well as 11,000 British and 10,000 coalition troops in Iraq. The US launched several tough military campaigns to subdue Iraqi resistance, which also had the effect of further alienating the populace. The rising violence prompted the Bush administration to reverse its Iraq policy; the transfer of power to an interim government would take place in July 2004, much earlier than originally planned....

The turmoil and violence in Iraq increased throughout 2004. Suicide bombings, kidnappings and beheadings targeted civilians, Iraqi security forces, foreign workers, and coalition soldiers. By April, a number of separate uprisings had spread throughout the Sunni triangle [a roughly triangular area to the north-west of Baghdad, largely inhabited by Sunni Arab Muslims; the three corners of the triangle are Baghdad on the east side, Ramadi on the west side, and Tikrit on the north side] and in the Shia-dominated south. In September alone there were 2300 attacks by insurgents. In October, US officials estimated there were between 8000 and 12,000 hard-core insurgents and a total of more than 20,000 'active sympathisers'. Loosely divided into Ba'athists, nationalists, and Islamists, all but about 1000 were thought to be indigenous fighters.

On 28th June 2004, sovereignty was officially returned to Iraq. Former exile and Iraqi Government Council member Iyad Allawi became Prime Minister of the Iraqi interim government, and Ghazi al-Yawar, a Sunni Muslim, was chosen as President.

Iraq's elections on 30th January 2005 to select a 275-seat National Assembly went ahead as scheduled, and a total of 8.5 million people voted, representing about 58% of those Iraqis who were eligible to vote. A coalition of Shias, the United Alliance, received 48% of the vote, the Kurdish parties received 26%, and the Sunnis just 2% - most Sunni leaders had called for a boycott. In April, Jalal Talabani, a Kurd, became President, and Ibrahim al-Jaafari, a religious Shia, became Prime Minister.

The elections, however, did not stem the insurgency, which grew increasingly sectarian during 2005 and predominantly involved insurgents targeting Shia and Kurdish civilians in suicide bombings. The death toll for Iraqi civilians is estimated to have reached 30,000 since the start of the war. The lack of security has continued to frustrate reconstruction efforts. Despite investing \$9 billion over the past two years, the US has made only 'limited progress' on rebuilding the country's infrastructure....

On 23rd February 2006, insurgents bombed and seriously damaged the golden dome atop the Shias' most revered shrine in Iraq, the Askariya Shrine in Samarra. The bombings ignited ferocious sectarian attacks between Shias and Sunnis. More than 1000 people were killed over several days, and Iraq seemed poised for civil war.

(Source: *Infoplease, 2006*)

The human rights situation in Iraq deteriorated significantly in 2005, with a continuing rise in the number of armed attacks by insurgent groups, including the deliberate targeting of civilians and violent attacks such as suicide bombings. The level of abduction of Iraqis, in many cases for ransom, has remained high, while those of foreign nationals has decreased – reflecting in part the departure of foreign personnel working with humanitarian agencies, media outlets and others as a result of deteriorating security conditions....

Efforts to boost economic reconstruction and the rebuilding of Iraq's devastated infrastructure continue to be hampered by general instability in the country and the level of violence caused by insurgency and counter-insurgency attacks....

Insurgent groups perpetrated widespread attacks against civilians throughout 2005, claiming the lives of hundreds of Iraqis and other nationals. Among the groups responsible for these abuses are al-Qaeda in Iraq, Ansar al-Sunna and the Islamic Army in Iraq, which have all targeted civilians for abductions and executions. The first two groups have repeatedly boasted about massive car bombs and suicide bombs in mosques, markets, bus stations and other civilian areas.

The victims of targeted assassinations by insurgent groups include government officials, politicians, judges, journalists, humanitarian workers, doctors, professors and those deemed to be collaborating with the foreign forces in Iraq, including translators, cleaners and others who perform civilian jobs for the US-led Multi-National Force in Iraq (MNF – I). Insurgents have directed suicide and car bomb attacks at Shia mosques, Christian churches and Kurdish political parties with the purpose of killing civilians. Claims that these communities are legitimate targets because they may support the foreign forces in Iraq have no basis in international law, which requires the protection of any civilian who is not actively participating in the hostilities.

(Source: taken from *Human Rights Watch: Overview of Human Rights Issues in Iraq, 2006*)

Kirkuk, Iraq – Kurdish leaders have inserted more than 10,000 of their militia members into Iraq army divisions in northern Iraq to lay the groundwork to swarm south, seize the oil-rich city of Kirkuk and possibly half of Mosul and secure the borders of an independent Kurdistan.

Five days of interviews with Kurdish leaders and troops in the region suggest that US plans to bring unity to Iraq before withdrawing American troops by training and equipping a national army aren't gaining traction. Instead, some troops that are formally under US and Iraqi national command are preparing to protect territory and ethnic and religious interests in the event of Iraq's fragmentation, which many of them think is inevitable.

The soldiers said that while they wore Iraqi uniforms they still considered themselves members of the Peshmerga – the Kurdish militia – and were awaiting orders from Kurdish leaders to break ranks. Many said they wouldn't hesitate to kill their Iraqi comrades, especially Arabs, if a fight for an independent Kurdistan erupted.

The Kurds have readied their troops not only because they've long yearned to establish an independent state but also because their leaders expect Iraq to disintegrate, senior leaders in the Peshmerga – literally, 'those who face death' – said. The Kurds are mostly secular Sunni Muslims, and are ethnically distinct from Arabs....

One key to the Kurds' plan for independence is securing control of Kirkuk, the seat of a province that holds some of Iraq's largest oilfields. Should the Kurds push for independence, Kirkuk and its oil would be a key economic engine.

The city's Kurdish population was driven out by former Sunni Arab dictator Saddam Hussein, whose 'Arabisation' programme paid thousands of Arab families to move there and replace recently deported or murdered Kurds.

'Kirkuk is Kurdistan; it does not belong to the Arabs,' Hamid Afandi, the minister of Peshmerga for the Kurdistan Democratic Party [KDP], one of the two major Kurdish groups, said in an interview at his office in the Kurdish city of Irbil. 'If we can resolve this by talking, fine, but if not, then we will resolve it by fighting.'

(Source: *Knight Ridder Newspapers, Washington Bureau, 27 December 2005*)

Ivory Coast (National name: République de Côte d'Ivoire)

The Ivory Coast is in western Africa on the Gulf of Guinea. Its neighbours are Liberia, Guinea, Mali, Burkina Faso, and Ghana. It has a population (2006 estimation) of 17,654,843. The official capital is Yamoussoukro but the administrative capital is Abidjan, with an overall population of 4,113,600. The official language is French and African languages are also spoken.

The government was a presidential/parliamentary democracy until December 1999, when a coup installed a military democracy. Felix Houphouët-Boigny was president from the grant of independence from France in 1960 until his death in 1993, but massive protests by students, farmers and professionals forced him to legalise opposition parties and hold the first contested election in 1990. Houphouët-Boigny won the election with 81% of the vote. He was succeeded by President Henri Konan Bedie and in 1998 thousands of demonstrators protested against a constitutional revision that granted him greatly enhanced power. Bedie also introduced the concept of *ivoirité* ('Pure Ivorian pride') which led to a dangerous xenophobia against people who were not pure Ivorians and to ethnic Malians and Burkinians being driven out of the country in 1999.

President Bedie was overthrown in the country's first military coup in December 1999 and General Robert Guei took control of the country. There was an attempt to return to democracy when voters approved a draft constitution in 2000. However, the document only allowed those of 'pure Ivorian' stock to run for president, which excluded nearly 40% of the population. General Guei ran against a civilian opposition candidate, Laurent Gbagbo. In an election which appeared to have been rife with fraud, both men declared themselves the winner. Popular outcry against Guei forced him to leave the country and Gbagbo became president. However, the popular opposition leader, Alassane Ouattara, had been excluded from the election on the specious grounds that he was not pure Ivorian [he only had one Ivorian parent]. This caused a dispute in which hundreds died. Ouattara was finally granted Ivorian citizenship in June 2002, allowing him to run for president.

Guei was killed on 19 September 2002 in an attempted coup staged by mutineering soldiers against the government and President Gbagbo accused Guei of staging the coup. Fighting continued even after a peace deal calling for the government to share power with the northern rebels was agreed in January 2003. The war was declared officially over in July that year but it was a fragile peace and pro-government and rebel militias remained armed. Civil war erupted again in November 2004 and another peace deal was signed but again no one was disarmed.

(Source: *Infoplease*)

During 2005, the political impasse between the Ivorian government and northern-based New Forces (Forces Nouvelles) rebels [composed of three groups of rebels, the Patriotic Movement of Côte d'Ivoire (MPCI), the Ivorian Popular Movement of the Greater West (MPIGO), and the Movement for Justice and Peace (MPJ)] resulted in a steady increase in human rights abuses by Ivorian security forces, the rebels, and militias associated with both sides. Throughout the year, there were persistent reports of extrajudicial executions, torture, arbitrary detentions, extortion and looting, and of recruitment and use of child soldiers by all sides.

Efforts to end the political-military crisis saw the failure of a third internationally negotiated peace accord, the African Union-brokered Pretoria Agreement, signed in April 2005. By the end of 2005, the apparent disenfranchisement of the rebels from the political process – as well as internal divisions along ethnic lines within the Ivorian security forces – led to serious concerns about either a renewal of armed conflict or a coup d'état. The prospect of a renewed military offensive by either side raises serious human rights concerns given the government's prominent use of ill-disciplined militias and hate media to incite violence against perceived opponents. The extent to which the rebel leadership maintains effective command and control over its forces and the extent to which United Nations peacekeepers could protect vulnerable groups of civilians are also of concern.

During 2005, scores of summary executions were carried out by the police, army, and the Central Command Security Operation Force (CCOS) – a new security force of about 1700 men created by Presidential decree in July 2005 to ensure security in Abidjan. The majority of these executions appeared to target northerners, West African immigrants and other perceived rebel sympathisers, though the government maintained that the executions took place in the course of combating common crime. The police, army, CCOS and, to a lesser extent, armed militias engaged in systematic and widespread extortion, racketeering and intimidation of businessmen, street traders, and motorists among others.

Pro-government militias and groups, sometimes working together with state security forces, intimidated and at times attacked opposition party members, journalists and human rights activists aligned with pro-opposition newspapers and United Nations peacekeepers. A violent pro-government student group, the Students' Federation of Cote d'Ivoire (FESCI), committed serious abuses, including torture and rape, against students perceived to be supporting the opposition. In July 2005, the pro-government Young Patriot militia burned opposition newspapers, threatened to kill newspaper vendors, surrounded and threatened the offices of opposition newspapers, and forced their way into a public TV station. UN peacekeepers and civilian staff were, on several occasions, intimidated, surrounded, and prevented from patrolling and conducting investigations in government-controlled areas.

New Forces rebels systematically extort money and pillage goods, including livestock and foodstuffs, from civilians in villages both under their control and within the buffer zone. Suspected government collaborators and spies were on several occasions tortured and summarily executed by rebel leaders. In the north, rebel commanders arbitrarily dispense justice, in turn leading to severe violations of human rights: numerous individuals accused of common crimes are arbitrarily detained within prisons, informal detention centres and military camps for often extended periods of time. The Dozos, a traditional tribally based defence group now working in coordination with the New Forces, has also committed serious violations including extortion, arbitrary detention, torture and rape.

Throughout 2005, neither the government nor the rebel leadership took concrete steps to discipline, investigate or hold accountable those responsible for ongoing crimes, much less past atrocities which took place during the 2000 election violence, the 2002-2003 civil war, and violent crackdown on an opposition demonstration in March 2004.

For their part, the United Nations Security Council and African Union resisted the adoption of concrete efforts to either hold the perpetrators accountable through prosecutions or to restrain the actions of alleged human rights violators through the imposition of travel and economic sanctions.

No one country, international body or individual appeared willing or able to exert sufficient influence to move the two sides [the Ivorian government and the rebels] towards a peaceful resolution to the political and military crisis. Throughout 2005, key international players were exasperated with the lack of progress in the implementation of yet another peace accord.

However, the African Union, which during 2005 took the lead in peace negotiations, was loath to use and maintain effective veto power over the only leverage tool available – United Nations economic and travel sanctions. Key international players were equally unprepared to take measures to combat impunity although the United Nations on numerous occasions expressed concern about ongoing violations.

(Source: taken from *Human Rights Watch: Overview of Human Rights Issues in Cote d'Ivoire, 2005*)

Ivory Coast was long one of Africa's most politically stable countries. For decades after its independence from France in 1960, the country enjoyed religious and ethnic harmony and was among the most prosperous on the continent. All changed in 1999, when Army General Robert Guei led a military coup that overthrew the government of Henri Konan Bedié. The country has since been divided along ethnic, political and religious lines. In September 2002, northern Muslims expressed discontent in a mutiny that escalated into a full-scale rebellion. The conflict appeared to have ended with the French-brokered Linas-Marcoussis peace accords in January 2003, creating a new government of national reconciliation with power shared between northern-based rebels and the southern government.

Both sides, however, threatened to return to violence. The supporters of the government accused the French of helping the rebels to overthrow President Laurent Gbagbo. In September 2003, the rebel group New Forces pulled out of the government, accusing President Gbagbo of lacking good faith in implementing the peace agreement. The conflict further intensified in March 2004, when the government used excessive means to quash street protests. In October 2004, the UN peacekeeping mission in Ivory Coast (UNOCI) failed to achieve disarmament as rebels accused President Gbagbo of not implementing agreed reforms.

In November 2004, the government ended the fragile ceasefire by conducting air strikes in the rebel-held north, killing a group of French peacekeepers in the process. France retaliated by destroying the Ivorian air force, sparking widespread anti-French rioting and threats against foreigners.

(Source: taken from *UN Security Council – Global Policy Forum, 2005*)

On September 19, 2002, a group of soldiers took up arms against the Ivory Coast Government. The rebel group, the Patriotic Movement of the Côte d'Ivoire (MPCI), has since controlled the largely Muslim north, which is estimated to be 40% of the country.

Following those initial armed conflicts, two new rebel groups emerged in the western part of the Ivory Coast: the Movement for Justice and Peace (MJP) and the Ivorian Popular Movement for the Far West (MPIGO), opening two new fronts and further complicating the picture. The rest of the Ivory Coast in the south remains in government hands.

The rebels claim that they are fighting for the rights of the Muslim majority in the north and ethnic groups in the west, who have been marginalised since the death of former president, Felix Houphouët-Boigny.

France, the Ivory Coast's former colonial ruler, has been acting as a mediator over the past six months in an effort to restore peace in the West African nation. Some peace talks took place in January in Marcoussis, France, between the Ivorian government, the political opposition, and the three rebel groups. A peace agreement was negotiated, following which Mr Seydou Diarra was appointed as the new Prime Minister of the Ivory Coast to head a government of national reconciliation. Two months after this appointment, Mr Diarra warned that he may step down, as he faces poor co-operation both from the rebels and from the government. New reports of fighting, in which some civilians were killed in the western part of the country, coincided with the conclusion of the peace agreement.

Several conflicts, assassinations, and a mass grave discovery have been reported in the Ivory Coast, for which neither the rebel groups nor the government are taking responsibility. The organisation Human Rights Watch reports that government and rebel groups are responsible for serious human rights abuses against civilians in western Ivory Coast. The latest human disaster to be reported is the death of 40 civilians when helicopter gun ships attacked the rebel-held town of Danane in western Ivory Coast, and the recent death of Felix Doh, leader of the Ivorian Popular Movement of the Far West....

Reports indicate that over a thousand people have died and more than a million have been forced to leave their homes... Some 20,000 Ivorians are now internally displaced persons (IDP). Nearly 45,000 Liberians have decided to leave Ivory Coast and return to Liberia, despite the inferior living conditions there.... According to the International Federation of the Red Cross, 50,000 Malians living in Ivory Coast have returned to Mali. Burkina Faso has also taken in an estimated 150,000 returnees from Ivory Coast.

(Source: taken from *Oxfam in America: Humanitarian Crisis in the Ivory Coast, 2003*)

Kosovo

Kosovo or Kosovo-Metohija is a province in southern Serbia, which was part of the former Yugoslavia. Pristina is the capital city. Kosovo has a population (2002 est.) of 1,900,000. Before 1999, the population was about 80% Albanian; ethnic Albanians now make up about 88% of the inhabitants.

Settled by the Slavs in the 7th century, the region passed to Bulgaria in the 9th century and to Serbia in the 12th century. From 1389 to 1913, it was under Turkish rule. Partitioned in 1913 between Serbia and Montenegro, it was incorporated into Yugoslavia after World War I. Following World War II, Kosovo became an autonomous region within Serbia. In 1990, demands for a greater autonomy were rebuffed by Serbia, which rescinded its autonomous status. Albanians were repressed and Serbian migration into the region encouraged; in response, Albanians pressed for Kosovo's complete independence.

Harsh Serbian repression and a breakdown in negotiations to settle the issue provoked NATO (North Atlantic Treaty Organisation) into attacking Serbia by air in March 1999. Serbia responded by forcing hundreds of thousands of ethnic Albanians to flee Kosovo, creating an enormous refugee problem; perhaps 1.5 million Albanian Kosovans were expelled from their homes or fled. An estimated 7000 to 10,000 Kosovans were killed by Serbian forces. An agreement resulted in the end of the bombing campaign and withdrawal of Serbian forces from Kosovo in June 1999, and NATO peacekeepers entered the province. Many Serbs fled; those that remain are largely in areas bordering Serbia proper.

(Source: *Infoplease*)

Throughout the civil war [from 1991-1995, between Serbia, the largest of the republics, which sought to maintain the Yugoslav Federation, and the republics of Croatia and Bosnia], conditions in Kosovo worsened considerably – tens of thousands of state employees who were of Kosovo Albanian origin lost their jobs, leading to lack of proper access to education and healthcare for the majority population and destruction of the local economy. Human rights violations and black marketeering were commonplace. Calls for Kosovo to achieve independence from what remained of the former Republic of Yugoslavia gained in popularity and in 1996 the [Albanian] Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA) emerged, carrying out guerrilla attacks on Serb forces. In 1997, the KLA declared some areas of Kosovo to be 'liberated' territory.

(Source: *Information Centre about Asylum and Refugees, March 2006*)

Kosovo War Crimes Chronology: January 1998 – April 1999 (Human Rights Watch, 28 April, 1999)

War crimes and crimes against humanity by the Yugoslav forces in Kosovo have been a focus of international attention since NATO bombing began on 24 March 1999. However, civilians have been the targets of war crimes and other violations of humanitarian law since the Kosovo conflict began in January 1998.

Below is a chronology of the major war crimes Human Rights Watch has documented from January 1998 to April 1999. The list, which is far from exhaustive, also includes abuses committed by the Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA), such as kidnappings and summary executions, although the vast majority of the violations over the past year are attributable to the Serbian police or Yugoslav Army.

28 February-1 March 1998: Serbian special police units attacked the towns of Likosane and Qirez in the Drenica region of Kosovo with combat helicopters, armoured vehicles and heavy shelling, leaving 25 ethnic Albanians dead. Ten members of the Ahmeti family were summarily executed and four brothers of the Sejdiu family died while in police custody.

5-7 March 1998: Serbian special police attacked the family compound of Adem Jashari, a local KLA leader, in Donji Prekaz. An estimated 58 members of the Jashari family were killed, including 18 women and 10 children under the age of 16. At least six ethnic Albanians were killed in unclear circumstances in the nearby village of Lausa.

25 May 1998: Evidence strongly suggests that at least nine and possibly as many as 29 ethnic Albanians were summarily executed by Serbian special police in Ljubeni, a village near Pej.

31 May 1998: An estimated 300 special police forces attacked the village of Novi Poklek in Drenica. Police forces seized 10 ethnic Albanian men, of whom one is confirmed dead and nine remain missing and are presumed dead. Police reportedly looted and burned over two dozen homes.

19 July 1998: The KLA began its first major offensive, an attack on the town of Orahovac. At least 42 people were killed in the fighting, and on estimate another 40 remain unaccounted for. Reports of mass graves and summary executions surfaced, but remain unconfirmed.

27 August 1998: 22 civilians were reportedly executed by KLA members in the village of Kleka.

9 September 1998: The bodies of 34 people, including both ethnic Serbs and Albanians, were found in an artificial lake near the village of Glodjane. The evidence strongly suggests they were killed by the KLA.

26 September 1998: Serbian special police forces massacred 21 members of the Delijaj family, including women and children, one as young as 18 months old, in Gornje Obrinje. Later the same day, police forces killed three other villagers in another part of the town. In Golubovac, a village several kilometres from Gornje Obrinje, 13 civilian men were executed (with one survivor).

15 January 1999: A total of 45 ethnic Albanians were killed in Racak by the Serbian special police. At least 23 were apparently executed, and 18 others, including a 12-year-old boy and two women, were also killed. [See report below.]

25 March 1999: Refugees reported that more than 60 ethnic Albanian men were executed in Bela Crkva, including 20 members of the Popaj family and 25 members of the Zhuniqui family.

26 March 1999: Yugoslav forces reportedly killed 40 ethnic Albanian men in Velika Krusa.

1-4 April 1999: According to refugees, Yugoslav security forces killed at least 47 men in a violent depopulation campaign in Djakovica.

(Source: *Human Rights Watch 1999*)

[Details of one of the cases outlined above]

Human Rights Watch investigation finds: Yugoslav Forces Guilty of War Crimes in Racak, Kosovo

29 January 1999: After a detailed investigation, [Human Rights Watch] accused Serbian special police forces and the Yugoslav army of indiscriminately attacking civilians, torturing detainees, and committing summary executions. The evidence suggests that government forces had direct orders to kill village inhabitants over the age of 15.

The killing of 45 ethnic Albanian civilians has provoked an apparent shift in western policy towards Kosovo....Human Rights Watch conducted separate interviews in Kosovo with 14 witnesses to the attack, many of whom are hiding out of fear for their lives, as well as with foreign journalists and observers who visited Racak on 16 January. Together, the testimonies suggest a well planned and executed attack by government forces on civilians in Racak, where the KLA had a sizeable presence and had conducted some ambushes on police patrols.

As has happened on numerous occasions in the Kosovo conflict, once the KLA retreated, government forces moved in and committed atrocities against the residents of the village. While it is possible that some residents may have defended their homes in the morning, most were clearly not involved in any armed resistance. At least 23 people were summarily executed by the police while offering no resistance – a clear violation of the laws of war....

Villagers told consistent stories of how government forces rounded up, tortured, and then apparently executed the 23 ethnic Albanians on a hill outside the village. Two witnesses interviewed by Human Rights Watch saw these men being beaten by the police and then taken off in the direction of the hill. Local villagers, foreign journalists, and diplomatic observers who saw the bodies the next day said that the victims had been shot from close range, most of them in the head; some of them appeared to have been shot while running away. Four men are known to have survived.

18 other people were killed outside Racak, including a 12-year-old boy and at least two female civilians. At least one civilian, Nazmi Ymeri, aged 76, was executed in his yard. Witnesses claim that Banush Kamberi, whose headless body was found in his yard, was last seen alive in the custody of the police. At least two people, Bajram Mehmeti and his daughter Hanumshahe, aged 20, were killed by a grenade thrown by the police as they were running through the street.

Human Rights Watch confirmed that a group of approximately 40 policemen, in blue uniforms and without masks, shot from a distance of 20 metres on unarmed civilians who were running through their yards. They killed Riza Beqa, aged 44, Zejnel Beqa, 22, and Halim Beqa, 12, and wounded two women, Zyhra Beqa, aged 42, and her daughter Fetije, 18. It is believed that local policemen from the nearby Stimlje police station participated in this action.

(Source: *Human Rights Watch 1999*)

Yugoslav Government Forces systematically expel ethnic Albanians from Kosovo Human Rights Watch, 30 March 1999

Refugees reported to Human Rights Watch researchers today that Serbian special police and Yugoslav military units are systematically expelling ethnic Albanians from Kosovo, including the cities of Pec [Pej/Peja] and Prizren, in a well-orchestrated and centrally organised campaign to rid the region of the majority of its population....

Refugees from the major Kosovo cities of Pec (population approximately 100,000) and Prizren (population approximately 80,000) reported that there was widespread shooting in and around the cities from Thursday March 25 to Saturday March 27, during which time many shops were burned or bombed....Refugees reported that their homes were raided by Serbian special police and/or Yugoslav Army units who moved from neighbourhood to neighbourhood, ordering people to leave their homes and forcing them into columns that were then accompanied to the border. Refugees repeatedly told how soldiers and police threatened that anyone who did not leave within four hours would be killed....

All ethnic Albanian residents of Pec, a city in western Kosovo, reported that they were forced to gather in the central square where local trucks and private buses had been commandeered by the police to transport them out of the city....Several of those interviewed by Human Rights Watch reported that individuals had been pulled out of the convoy and killed, and one person interviewed reported that soldiers stopped the bus he was on and took between 10 and 15 men off the bus. He reported having subsequently heard shooting, but had not actually seen anyone shot. He added, 'As we drove past, I saw blood on the road.'

(Source: *Human Rights Watch*)

War crime clues beneath Kosovo rubble

Investigating a crime scene is standard duty for an FBI agent, but when the scene is a house in Kosovo, burned down after 20 people inside were shot to death, even experienced agents are stunned.

The site – in Djakovica [Gjakova], a city in western Kosovo – is one of six named in an indictment from the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia, accusing President Slobodan Milosevic and four of his government aides of crimes against humanity.

An FBI team, made up of dozens of forensic scientists and other specialists, is in Djakovica to see if there's enough evidence to link the crimes committed there to specific individuals.

That means digging through the rubble of a house on Milos Gilic Street, a place where human remains have been found.

War crimes investigators say mass murder took place here in late March or early April. It's alleged that Serb troops, determined to rid Kosovo of ethnic Albanians, herded 20 people, mostly women and children, into the house where they were shot to death.

The troops then allegedly burned the house, causing the roof to collapse and bury corpses underneath....

The FBI will also excavate at least one other site in Djakovica, a place where prosecutors allege six ethnic Albanian men were executed and buried in March....

Residents of Djakovica say the 26 deaths under investigation are just part of the story.

They've come forward with '400 or 500 names of men who remain missing and whose fate is utterly unknown,' David Scheffer, the US ambassador-at-large for war crimes issues, said on Thursday.

For now, the two sites in Djakovica are the only official crime scenes. Even so, explains [FBI agent] Paul Mallett, 'all of Djakovica' resembles the house on Milos Gilic Street.

'This whole city of 50,000 or 60,000 has literally been burned out,' he told CNN. '[We've been told that] if you were to look into any one of these homes, underneath the fallen roof tiles, you'd find bodies.'

'In any one instance, it's tragic,' says the FBI agent, 'but when you put them all together, it's staggering.'

(Source: *CNN News, June 25 1999*)

Further Information

- ↓ *UN Convention and the Status of Refugees*
 - ↓ *Other Key Legislation relating to asylum seekers and refugees*
 - ↓ *Challenging Misconceptions: facts and figures*
 - ↓ *Claiming asylum: the procedure*
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 - ↓ *Controlling our Borders: Five-year strategy for immigration and asylum, announced by the Home Secretary, Charles Clarke, in February 2005*
-
- ↓ *About Us: Community Regeneration Unit (CRU), Hastings Trust*
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UN Convention and the Status of Refugees

As a signatory to the 1951 United Nations Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees, the United Kingdom has an obligation to consider all applications for asylum made in this country. Each application is considered on its own merits to decide whether the applicant has shown a well-founded fear of persecution in his/her country of origin. To be well-founded, the fear of persecution must be based on race, religion, nationality, political opinion, or membership of a social group. The Government is committed to complying with its obligations under the Convention so that those who are genuinely fleeing persecution are given the protection they need. Applicants who are considered to have abused the immigration and asylum system of this country have their applications fast-tracked so that they can be removed from the UK.

(Source: *Home Office Immigration and Nationality Directorate*)

In common with 145 countries around the world, the UK is a signatory to the 1951 UN Convention relating to the Status of Refugees. The UN Convention, to which the UK became a signatory in 1954, defines who is a refugee and the obligations of countries which are signatories to the Convention. It was initially drawn up to protect European refugees after World War II but a 1967 Protocol expanded its scope to include refugees from any part of the world where there is war, persecution or political instability. To date, the United Nations, through this Convention, has protected about 50 million refugees around the world.

'Who is a refugee?

Article I of the UN Convention defines a refugee as "A person who is outside his/her country of nationality or habitual residence; has a well-founded fear of persecution because of his/her race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion; and is unable or unwilling to avail himself/herself of the protection of that country, or to return there, for fear of persecution."

'Why is the Convention important?

It was the first truly international agreement covering the most fundamental aspects of a refugee's life. It spelled out a set of basic human rights which should at least be equivalent to freedoms enjoyed by foreign nationals living legally in a given country and in many cases those of citizens of that state. It recognised the international scope of refugee crises and the necessity of international cooperation, including burden-sharing among states, in tackling the problem.

'Is the Convention still relevant?

Yes. It was originally adopted to deal with the aftermath of World War II in Europe and growing East-West political tensions. But though the nature of conflict and migration patterns have changed in the intervening decades, the Convention has proved remarkably resilient in helping to protect an estimated 50 million people in all types of situations. As long as persecution of individuals and groups persists, there will be a need for the Convention.' (Source: *Refugee Action*)

Thus the UK, in common with other signatories to the Convention, has an obligation to consider the cases of people who come here to claim asylum, and to offer a safe refuge to those it considers to be genuine refugees. No country has ever withdrawn from the Convention.

There is no such thing as an 'illegal asylum seeker'. Once they have claimed asylum, asylum seekers have a legal right to be in the country while their cases are considered.

Other Key legislation for asylum seekers and refugees

European Convention on Human Rights/The Human Rights Act 1998

The UK is a signatory to the Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms, commonly known as the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR). The Human Rights Act allows cases to which articles in the ECHR apply to be brought before the UK courts.

The ECHR sets out a number of civil and political rights which the UK must comply with. Article 3 prohibits torture, or other inhuman or degrading treatment. Removal of a person from the UK to a country where they face a real risk of suffering treatment contrary to Article 3 would itself constitute a breach of Article 3 by the UK. Where an applicant has not shown a well-founded fear of persecution under the 1951 United Nations Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees, but there may be a real risk of the applicant being subjected to torture, inhuman or degrading treatment, it is normally appropriate for the applicant to be granted Humanitarian Protection.

Discretionary Leave may be granted under the following circumstances when an applicant does not qualify for Humanitarian Protection but where it would still be inappropriate to remove him/her from the UK:

- Where removal would breach Article 3 of the ECHR but the person does not qualify for Humanitarian Protection (i.e. where a person's medical condition would make removal contrary to Article 3).
- Where removal would breach Article 8 of the ECHR (Right to respect for private and family life).
- For unaccompanied asylum seeking children.

(Source: *Home Office Immigration and Nationality Directorate*)

The Nationality Immigration and Asylum Act (the NIA Act)

On 29th October 2001, the then Home Secretary, David Blunkett, announced fundamental changes in the Government's immigration and asylum policy. The White Paper, *Secure Borders, Safe Haven: Integration with Diversity in Modern Britain*, was issued on 7th February 2002. This Act received Royal Assent on 7th November 2002.

Key provisions of the NIA Act

- An efficient and effective asylum process including induction, accommodation and removal centres.
- Speed up the asylum process, improve contact management and reduce opportunities for abuse of the system that is widespread.
- Strengthen the integrity of the borders of the UK whilst efficiently, flexibly and responsibly dealing with legitimate claims.
- Tackle illegal working, fraud and people trafficking.
- Update nationality law and improve the importance of receiving citizenship.

(Source: *Home Office Immigration and Nationality Directorate – Asylum Fact Sheet*)

Challenging Misconceptions: Facts and Figures

People questioned in a 2003 MORI poll believed that 23% of the world's refugees make for the UK. Figures given in the Refugee Council report, *Tell it like it is: The Truth About Asylum*, show the reality to be very different:

- Two-thirds of the world's refugees are living in developing countries, often in camps. Africa and Asia between them host over 60% of the world's refugees. Europe looks after just 25%.
- Conflict in Sudan has forced four million people from their homes. More than half a million have fled the country, mainly to neighbouring countries such as Chad. Fewer than 1500 Sudanese people applied for asylum in the UK in 2004.
- The UK is home to less than 3% of the world's refugees – around 270,000 out of nearly 10 million world-wide.
- At the end of 2004, the UK [one of then world's wealthiest nations] was 11th in the league table of European countries for the number of asylum applications per head of population, behind countries like Cyprus and Luxembourg.
- In 2000, the UK ranked 32nd in the table of the world's refugee hosting countries on the basis of size, wealth and relative populations. (*Above statistics are sourced from the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees*)

Another popular misconception is that most asylum seekers are 'bogus', only coming to the UK to find jobs or claim welfare benefits. The Refugee Council states:

'Even though the standard of proof needed to get refugee status is very high, in 2002 more than one in three asylum seekers were found to be in need of protection or were allowed to stay on humanitarian grounds. One in four appeals were successful. In 2003, 23% of initial decisions resulted in asylum seekers being given permission to stay in the UK and one in five appeals were successful.'

'The press often suggests that asylum seekers are coming to Britain for economic reasons, failing to recognise refugee movements as a distinct form of international migration. A report published in June 2004 showed that three out of four asylum seekers were fleeing countries in conflict. Afghanistan, Iraq and Somalia have been in the top five refugee-producing countries for the past three years. War, human rights abuses and the repression of ethnic minorities are common in all these countries.'

(Source: *Refugee Council – 'Nailing press myths about refugees'*)

'Asylum applications in the UK have more than halved over the last two years. There were 33,930 asylum applications in 2004 – and the number is falling. In comparison, around 90 million people visited the UK in 2003 – some 300,000 foreign students were studying here and 100,000 people were on work permits (*based on Home Office figures for 2003*).

'Asylum seekers are not allowed to work for the first 12 months of their application. They are forced to rely on state support, which is set at 30% below the normal level of income support.'

'Asylum seekers want to work and support themselves. Many do voluntary work while their asylum application is being processed.'

'Asylum seekers do not come to the UK to claim benefits. In fact, asylum seekers know very little about the asylum system before they arrive. (*Home Office Research Study 243 – Understanding the decision-making of asylum seekers, July 2002*)

'Asylum seekers do not jump the queue for council housing [in fact, they are not allowed council housing] and they cannot choose where they live. The accommodation allocated to them is not paid for by the local council. It is nearly always "hard-to-let" properties, which other people do not want to live in.

'Asylum seekers do not get special perks such as mobile phones or help to buy a car.

'Many asylum seekers live in poverty and experience poor health and hunger. (*Joint study by Oxfam and the Refugee Council, July 2002*)'

(Source: *Refugee Council – 'Tell it like it is: The Truth About Asylum'*)

Studies have also shown that many asylum seekers put themselves in the hands of an agent to arrange their journey to a place of safety, and therefore do not know which country they are coming to. Of those who do choose to come to the UK, this is usually because their country has colonial links with the UK, they speak English or they have family and friends here, rather than for economic reasons.

Another complaint is that asylum seekers are putting a strain on the National Health Service and bringing diseases to the UK, but according to The Medical Foundation for the Care of Victims of Torture:

'Once settled, asylum seekers make no more demands on the NHS than the general population. Blaming asylum seekers for the larger problems of the NHS may be easy but it is neither accurate nor fair.

'Dr Michael Peel, the Medical Foundation's [former] Health and Human Rights Advisor, said: "Asylum seekers may have high demands in the short term because they may not have had access to healthcare in the past or because of the consequences of the perilous journeys many have made to reach safety. But once they become settled their demands are no more than the general population."

'Nor do asylum seekers get preferential health treatment. According to the Department of Health, it is expected that an asylum seeker will be treated like any other UK resident as soon as they have submitted an asylum application. "They have the same access to healthcare as anyone else," a Health Department spokesman told the BBC. (7 November 2002)'

(Source: *The Medical Foundation for the Care of Victims of Torture*)

'There is no evidence to suggest that asylum seekers come to the UK to get free treatment for existing health problems. A TB screening pilot carried out by the Government in Dover tested around 5000 asylum seekers over a six-month period and found not a single case of symptomatic TB. Doctors did however find evidence of maltreatment and torture – evidence of the reasons why people had fled. (*Home Office Press Statement, May 2003*)

'The British Medical Association found that asylum seekers are more likely to become ill once they have arrived in the UK due to poor living conditions and lack of money for basic needs.' (*Asylum seekers: Meeting their healthcare needs*, British Medical Association, October 2002)
(Source: *Refugee Action*)

Some people believe that asylum seekers bring more crime to the UK. To quote once again from the Refugee Council's guide, *Tell it like it is: The Truth About Asylum*.

'A report by police chiefs concluded that the "vast majority of people seeking asylum are law-abiding citizens". (*Association of Chief Police Officers (ACPO) of England, Wales and Northern Ireland Asylum Seekers Policing Guide*)

'The Home Office has stated there is no evidence that asylum seekers are any more likely to commit crimes than anyone else. (*Immigration Minister Beverley Hughes, 19 March 2003 Hansard Column 821W*)

'Asylum seekers are more likely to be the victims of crime. The ACPO report expressed concern that asylum seekers feel unable to report incidents of racial harassment or violence.

'83% of female refugees and asylum seekers say they do not go out at night because they are scared of abuse and harassment. (*Refugee Action, December 2002*)

'A recent report found there is a likely link between media reporting of asylum issues and race-related crime. (*Media Image, Community Impact, Information Centre about Asylum and Refugees in the UK (ICAR), July 2004, commissioned by the Mayor of London*)

'Fish and chips, the Mini and Marks and Spencer are all British institutions – created or invented by refugees who came to the UK.

'More than 1000 medically qualified refugees are recorded on the British Medical Association's (BMA) database. According to the BMA, it only costs £10,000 to prepare a refugee doctor to practise in the UK. But it costs £250,000 to train a doctor from scratch. (*BBC News on-line, 16 June 2004*)

'Many refugees have academic or teaching qualifications. 754 refugee teachers are registered with London-based agencies alone. (*Refugee Teachers Task Force, September 2004*)

'Asylum-seeking children contribute very positively to schools across the country. This in turn enables more successful integration of families into local communities. (*OFSTED report, October 2003*)

'Immigrants, including asylum seekers and refugees, are paying more into the public purse over time and compared to their UK-born counterparts. (*Paying Their Way: The Fiscal Contribution of Immigrants in the UK, Institute for Public Policy Research, April 2005*)
(Source: *Refugee Council – 'Tell it like it is: The Truth About Asylum'*)

'A Home Office Survey of 263 people with refugee status or exceptional leave to remain in the UK showed that a high proportion were successful individuals with post secondary school qualifications and therefore could enrich the British culture.

'Refugees have a vested interest in learning English. Rather than exhibiting a reluctance to learn English, there is often a lack of services to meet the demand.

'Research shows that over 90% of refugees interviewed spoke at least one other language in addition to their first language and 65% spoke at least two other languages.

'The Society for the Protection of Science and Learning lists 17 Nobel Laureates, 71 Fellows or Foreign Members of the Royal Society and 50 Fellows or corresponding Fellows of the British Academy as refugees.

'Fish and chips, that great British tradition, was brought to the UK by 17th-century Jews expelled from Portugal.

'Alex Issigonis, who fled the war between Turkey and Greece, was the brain behind the Mini and the Morris Minor.

'Karl Marx and Sigmund Freud were refugees and Sir John Hobson, the first Governor of the Bank of England, was the grandson of an asylum seeker from France.

'Tanya Sarne, creator of the Ghost fashion label, is the daughter of a Russian refugee.

'Architect Eva Jiricna CBE fled to the UK from Prague in 1968 and went on to be named one of Britain's most influential women.

'The late impresario and life peer Lew Grade fled the Ukraine to become one of the giants of British television. He became the head of Associated Television and was behind such hits as *The Saint*, *The Muppet Show* and *Thunderbirds*.

'Other famous refugees to Britain include: King Michael Hohenzollern of Romania; Emperor Haile Selassie of Ethiopia; Arthur Koestler, author and journalist from Hungary; Camille Pissarro, painter from France; Victor Hugo, writer from France; Karl Marx, political revolutionary from Germany; Wole Soyinka, writer and Nobel Prize winner from Nigeria; and Vladimir Lenin, political revolutionary from Russia.

'Many countries have produced reports proving that refugees contribute positively to economic growth. Canadian and Australian studies show that once refugees settle, they actually increase government revenue and create a net tax benefit.

'Home Office's own research confirms that refugees' entrepreneur talents are under-utilised in Britain. Many asylum seekers come to the UK with substantial work and educational qualifications. The countries that people are coming from are not the poorest ones; they are countries where there is persecution.

'Some of Britain's wealthiest entrepreneurs are refugees – Paul Hamlyn, Publisher of Reed International Books, and Rolf Schild of Huntleigh Engineering. Many others have made significant contributions – Michael Marks, founder of Marks and Spencer; Joseph Rotblat, physicist; Sir Georg Solti, conductor; Alan Yentob, BBC Programmes Director; Yasmin Alibhai Brown, journalist and editor; Robert Berki, political theorist; Sir Alexander Korda, film director; Sir Karl Popper, philosopher; Sousa Jamba, writer, to name but a few.

'Home Office research shows that overall in 1999/2000 migrants contributed £31.2 billion in taxes while consuming £28.8 billion in benefits and services. Therefore migrants contributed around £2.5 billion to the Exchequer.

'The lesson of history is that immigrants and refugees can bring significant benefits, economic and cultural. While public debate on this is yet again dominated by proposed legislation to impose ever tighter restrictions, it is a lesson that appears to have been lost.' (*Sarah Spencer, Director of Citizenship and Governance at the Institute of Public Policy Research*)

(Source: UNHCR (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees) in the UK - Public Information Unit)

Claiming asylum: the procedure

Asylum seekers can either claim asylum at the airport or port of entry, or 'in country' at the Immigration and Nationality Directorate (IND) department of the Home Office, based at Croydon and Liverpool. Asylum seekers often have false documents or no documents at all because:

'People fleeing persecution often have to leave their countries, their friends and families at short notice. If they have been persecuted by the state they will want to avoid attracting the attention of the authorities and so they are often forced to pay an "agent" to arrange fake documentation to help them escape. Some asylum seekers may travel by plane to safety while others are smuggled by sea. These journeys can be arduous and dangerous. People, including children, sometimes have to be smuggled in containers or cramped vehicles for long periods of time, which can lead to physical and mental health problems and malnutrition. The 1951 UN Convention states that an asylum seeker should not be penalised for entering a country illegally as long as they present themselves to the authorities on arrival.' (Source: *Refugee Action*)

When the asylum application has been made, the applicant is screened. Officials at the Asylum Screening Unit of the IND take his or her photograph and fingerprints and record personal details such as full name, date of birth and country of origin. The applicant is then issued with an Application Registration Card (ARC) containing this information.

Applicants then attend a full asylum interview at the IND, during which they are questioned about their asylum claim. IND caseworkers assess the information and any documentary evidence they have been given and decide whether or not to grant the applicants asylum. This used to be a long-drawn-out process resulting in asylum seekers being left in limbo, sometimes for years. Nowadays, however, caseworkers aim to come to a decision within two months.

If the caseworkers at the IND consider that applicants meet the criteria laid down by the UN Convention, they will grant them refugee status. In the past, refugees were granted Indefinite Leave to Remain (ILR) which meant that they could stay in the UK for as long as they wished. Since 30th August 2005, however, refugees have been granted limited leave for five years. At the end of the five years, their case is reviewed to see if the situation in their country of origin has improved and the fear of persecution has thus been removed. If it has, refugees may be expected to leave the UK.

Refugees can immediately apply for their families to join them in the UK (Family Reunion); they do not have to wait until they have been granted ILR. They can apply for a Home Office Travel Document (even if they have a passport from their country of origin, they are not permitted to travel on it because they are no longer under the protection of that country). They have the same rights as British citizens, with the same access to medical treatment, housing, education, welfare benefits and employment.

An asylum seeker who is not granted refugee status may be granted either Humanitarian Protection or Discretionary Leave, which both replaced Exceptional Leave to Remain (ELR) in April 2003. Exceptional Leave to Remain was granted where an applicant did not qualify for refugee status but it was not considered safe to return the applicant to his or her country of origin. It was granted more liberally than either Humanitarian Protection or Discretionary Leave. For example, all applicants from a country that was considered unsafe to return to would previously have been granted ELR, usually for four years, whereas Humanitarian Protection and Discretionary Leave are granted on a case-by-case basis.

Humanitarian Protection is granted in cases where the Home Office recognises that there is a real risk of death, torture, or other inhuman and degrading treatment, which falls outside the strict terms of the 1951 Refugee Convention but which comes within the scope of Article 3 (Right not to be subjected to torture, or inhuman and degrading treatment) of the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR). Since 30th August 2005, those granted Humanitarian Protection are also given leave to remain for five years and also have immediate rights to family reunion. During this time, they are entitled to welfare benefits and may take up employment in the same way as someone with refugee status. At the end of the five-year period, their case is subject to review, after which they may be granted an extension of protection or ILR. If the need for protection is no longer found to exist, the applicant will be refused leave and arrangements will be made for his/her return. A person who has been granted Humanitarian Protection is entitled to apply for ILR after five years. (Source: *Refugee Council, 2006*)

Discretionary Leave is granted by the Home Office in cases where applicants do not qualify for refugee status or Humanitarian Protection but cannot be removed. This may be because they have a serious medical condition, making travel or return dangerous, or because removal would contravene their human rights, such as under Article 8 (Right to respect for private and family life). There may be other practical and legal obstacles which make removal impossible. Discretionary Leave is normally granted for a period of three years, though it can be granted for shorter periods. For example, when an unaccompanied child under 18 has his/her asylum claim refused, a period of Discretionary Leave would be granted for the period until his/her 18th birthday. Those with Discretionary Leave have full access to welfare benefits and employment during the period of protection. Their case will be reviewed after three years, or the initial period of leave granted, and again after six years, when they will normally be eligible to apply for ILR. If it is decided that the person no longer has the need for protection, he/she will be removed. (Source: *Refugee Council*)

Applicants whose asylum claim is refused by the IND and who are not granted Humanitarian Protection or Discretionary Leave can appeal against this decision. In the past, appeals were made to the Immigration Appellate Authority, and some applicants had a further right of appeal to the Immigration Appeal Tribunal. However, the Asylum and Immigration Act passed in 2004 abolished this two-tier system and replaced it with a single-tier tribunal, the Asylum and Immigration Tribunal (AIT). There is no further right of appeal unless there has been an 'error of law' by the AIT, in which case their decision can be referred to the High Court for a review on the papers – that is, without an oral hearing. An applicant who has been refused by the AIT and the High Court may have a right of appeal to the Court of Appeal, but only on a point of law.

(Source: *Refugee Council*).

Once all rights of appeal have been exhausted, financial support to applicants is stopped and they have to leave their accommodation and return to their country of origin. If they are destitute, they can apply for an allowance known as 'hard case' support but this is only granted if applicants sign a document to say that they will return to their country voluntarily as soon as arrangements can be made for them to do so. 'Hard case' support consists of accommodation and food in a hostel and applicants have no choice as to where this hostel will be.

'Some rejected asylum seekers refuse to go home voluntarily because they believe that their application has been wrongly refused and that they will face persecution if they return. A person who does not take steps to return to their country is left destitute and often has to rely on friends, charities and faith groups for food and protection. Families were previously supported if they had children under 16 but recent legislation makes it possible for the government to remove support from parents and take children into care.'

(Source: *Refugee Action*)

Some asylum seekers are detained when they arrive in the UK if immigration officials believe that their cases can be dealt with quickly. They are sent to Oakington Reception Centre in Cambridgeshire for between seven and ten days while their case is 'fast-tracked'. If their applications are refused, some are released so that they can lodge an appeal but others do not have a right of appeal in the UK because they come from places which are on the Government's 'safe country list'. They are returned to their countries of origin and must lodge an appeal from there if they wish to take the matter further. The 'safe country list', also known as the 'white list', is amended from time to time as the situation in different countries changes.

Unsuccessful asylum seekers may be detained in a detention centre before they are forcibly removed from the UK. Before they can be removed, the Home Office has to ascertain that it is safe for them to return to the country they claim to come from and also that that country will accept them.

Living in the UK as a refugee

Refugees who have had Indefinite Leave to Remain for at least one year and have lived in the UK continuously for five years (or three years if they are married to a British citizen) can apply for British citizenship. This is not a right. The Home Office can refuse an application for citizenship and do not have to give a reason for their decision. Applicants must have knowledge of the English language and also of British culture and life in the UK. They must take and pass a 'Life in the UK' test. They are not allowed to vote until they have British nationality unless they are Commonwealth citizens.

Despite having been granted refugee status and even British citizenship, some people say that there is resistance to their integration into UK life by local people. There may be barriers to their being able to find a job that makes use of their qualifications, yet many refugees have university degrees and professional qualifications, and had good jobs in their country of origin before being forced to flee. They can make significant contributions in the UK yet they can often only get low-paid unskilled work.

History repeating itself: immigration throughout history

'The impact of immigration on the host country is always profound. Never more so than in ancient Britain, whose unwelcoming climate and negligible size made it an unlikely candidate as a focus for global migration.

'It was travelling bands of Celts and Picts that first colonised the British Isles. But the Roman occupation – from 43 BCE until the end of the fourth century – represented the first significant wave of immigration to break upon British shores, bringing with it a multiplicity of cultural influences and arrangements for governance...

'New incomers followed, with each group of settlers leaving their distinct mark.

'The Germanic tribes of the Angles, Saxons, Frisians and Jutes became the lifeblood of the English population, colonising Southern England, establishing new settlements and cultivating the land. In their wake, the Vikings brought further influences to the cultural diversity of Northern England and East Anglia, but not without hostility from the incumbent tribes.

'However, it was the Normans, descended as they were from Vikings who had settled in France, who were the most influential of all immigrants to Britain. The Norman Conquest of 1066 led to the establishment of a robust legal and administrative system to regulate the social and economic affairs of the country...

'The medieval period benefited from the immigration into Britain of Jewish businessmen, scholars and physicians. But their settlement was short-lived and, in 1290, the Jewish community in London and other major centres was expelled by Edward I.

'Replacing the Jews as the new mercantile class came Italian bankers and German merchants, followed by incoming communities of labourers, traders and textile workers from across Europe.

'They included French Protestants, or Huguenots, who arrived from the 16th century to escape Catholic persecution and settled in London, Norwich and Canterbury. With skills like silk weaving and silver-smithing and a reputation for diligence, these settlers were well received and became known as the "profitable strangers".

'In 1656, under the control of Oliver Cromwell, Jewish immigrants began to arrive from the Iberian Peninsula, and eastern and central Europe. They brought with them a variety of skills and trades, cementing the foundations of the modern day Jewish community and (alongside the Huguenots) providing significant financial support to the nation and its armed forces.

'The expansion of Britain's trading empire and its increasing mercantile wealth signalled a further era of significant migration. New arrivals included the Lascars – seamen from South East Asia and India – along with sailors from China, West Africa and modern-day Somalia and Yemen. The permanent settlers from this tide of seafaring expansion included the Chinese communities in Liverpool and London.

'But the expansion of empire also brought with it a different kind of migration. As Europeans sought cheap labour to work their plantations in the New World, they turned to slavery and the forced transportation of men, women and children from North and West Africa.

'This continuing movement of black slaves and the unassailable growth in Britain's trade across the world was to create much of the wealth that supported the Industrial Revolution. It also led to an increase in the numbers of African residents in England, estimated in 1770 to be around 14,000.

'In some respects, there was nothing new about this passage of refugees into Britain. Others had arrived against their will, fleeing natural disasters, persecution or conflict. And slaves, like many other immigrant groups throughout history, were to face an uncertain legal status on arrival...

'From the mid-19th century, the pattern of immigration in Britain was largely determined by the nation's response to two global phenomena: industrialisation and war...

'Industrial jobs in the emerging cities of Leeds, Bradford, Huddersfield and Manchester attracted immigrants from Germany and other parts of Europe. And as the creation of wealth led to an increase in leisure and recreation at the turn of the century, there was an influx of workers from Italy and elsewhere, keen to service the growth in street vending, catering, restaurants, baking and confectionery.

'But it was the two world wars of the 20th century that led to most of the movement in and out of Britain. In both wars, hundreds of thousands of citizens from across the empire fought for Britain and large numbers came to reside in the country following their period of active service.

'For the authorities at the end of WWI this was to present a major challenge. The regulations on immigration remained unclear, and during 1919 there were race riots in London and the port cities, and attacks on black immigrants. The official response to the period of unrest was repatriation, and by September that year some 600 black people had been deported.

'The challenge at the end of WWII was of a different kind. The end of hostilities signalled a major labour shortage, and for the first time in its history Britain began looking for immigrant workers. European voluntary workers from Poland, Italy, the Ukraine and Germany were enabled to settle, filling some job vacancies.

'But the migration of European labour was not sufficient and, with some official reluctance, Britain turned to workers from further afield to meet its workforce needs.

'From 1948 until the 1970s, Britain was to experience an unprecedented period of mass immigration and the arrival of many new and diverse cultures.

'With this increase in immigration came a rise in racial violence and bigotry. Far from being welcomed and thanked for their contributions during the war years, many of those arriving to take up work felt only the cold chill of a climate tinged with ignorance and prejudice.

'Since 1970, there has been a continued flow of people into the UK, bringing with it a rich diversity of cultures and skills from around the world. With this, have come some challenges, threats and tensions...

'...Immigration continues to bring significant numbers of new entrants to Britain...[but] racial tension has continued to be a feature of modern life for many UK residents, heightened by press hysteria about the supposed threats posed by asylum seekers and refugees.

'The influx of many different individuals, groups, races and cultures has had a significant and marked impact on our national history and identity: invaders have defined our borders; conquerors have established our systems of government, émigrés have contributed to our pursuit of knowledge, refugees have added to our wealth, commerce and industry. And immigrants of all kinds have shaped our music, art, sport, diet and cultural tastes.

'We are all descended from immigrants – it is just a question of how far back you want to go. The English poet John Donne summed this up: "No man is an island, entire of itself; every man is a piece of the continent".'

(Source: *'Lessons from history: UK immigration'*, Improvement and Development Agency, www.Local.Gov.UK)

Controlling our Borders: Making Migration Work for Britain: Five-year strategy for immigration and asylum, announced by the Home Secretary, Charles Clarke, in February 2005

This strategy was launched as the next stage of the Government's reform on asylum and immigration. Four out of five asylum applications are now decided within two months (20 months in 1997).

Key measures on asylum in the strategy include:

- **Granting refugees temporary leave** rather than permanent status while the Government reviews whether the situation in their country has improved. If it has not improved after five years, refugees would then be granted permanent status: if it has, they would be expected to return home.
- **Expansion of the detention estate** with 300 new places by 2007. Over time, as asylum intake falls and removals increase as the UK negotiates even more effective return agreements, we will move towards the point where it becomes the norm that those who fail can be detained.
- **Fast-tracking and closer management of asylum claims.** The very significant fall in the number of asylum applications means that the Government can expand fast-tracking for most new applications, and will expand the number of those detained under fast-track (including female fast-track at Yarl's Wood) by May [2005]. The Government will introduce tighter controls throughout the process, including using technology such as tagging and voice recognition, to assist removal.
- **Strengthening the UK's borders** through the rollout of 'e-borders' – where travellers will be electronically checked before they reach the UK, as they enter and as they leave. Ten high-risk routes covering six million people will have the new technology from as early as April this year [2005]. Immigration controls will continue to be extended beyond the UK's borders, with immigration officers clearing migrants for entry in their own country. The introduction of biometric identity cards will support this work. The Government will expand the successful airline liaison officer network in high-risk countries, working with airlines to stop illegal entrants setting off for the UK.
- **Further action on removals.** There has been steady progress on removing failed asylum seekers but there is still more to do. More failed asylum seekers will be removed than there are unsuccessful applicants by the end of 2005. The Government will work with source countries to secure more returns by placing immigration at the heart of our relationship, supporting them in their efforts but making clear that failure to co-operate will have repercussions – including access to some migration schemes such as the working holidaymakers scheme. The Government will have more control over applicants throughout the expanded fast-track process through detention and tagging, leading to more removals.

(Source: *Controlling our Borders: Making Migration Work for Britain*)

On 22nd June 2005, this strategy was incorporated into the **Immigration, Asylum and Nationality Bill 2005**.

The Immigration, Asylum and Nationality Act 2006 received Royal Assent on 28th March 2006. It continued to implement measures in *Controlling our Borders: Making Migration Work for Britain* with some changes that affect asylum seekers.

Information. The information clauses create new or extended powers, which are intended to strengthen the UK's border controls. Powers include those to:

- check individuals' identity where they have a biometric passport or visa;
- require individuals to provide their fingerprints within tighter time scales (within three days for asylum seekers);
- obtain information about the identity of passengers on board ships and flights travelling to the UK; and
- increase sharing of information between border agencies, the Immigration Service, police and HM Revenue and Customs.

Accommodation. This clause seeks to amend the law so that local authorities will be able to provide section 4 'hard case' accommodation to asylum seekers whose applications have been rejected but who cannot leave the country. Currently, section 4 support is only available in areas where private providers have accommodation. The bill seeks to make section 4 support more widely available. The new clause also gives the Home Secretary the flexibility to provide extra support when necessary to provide other essential items [other than food] such as nappies, prams and razors. However, [the clause] stipulates that support to those on section 4 cannot be provided in cash and should be provided in vouchers instead.

Integration loans. People who are recognised as refugees in accordance with the 1951 Refugee Convention and granted temporary leave will now be eligible for a refugee integration loan. This loan replaces the former system, which provided refugees with backdated payments that had been withheld while their asylum application was being determined.

Inspecting detention centres. The detention inspection regime is to be strengthened in relation to inspections of escort arrangements and short-term holding facilities. To date, the inspectorate has only had oversight of short-term holding facilities and escort arrangements on a voluntary basis. The bill makes this oversight statutory.

Removal: cancellation of leave. Currently, a person's leave to enter or remain in the UK is terminated at the time of removal directions being issued. This clause in the new Act proposes to move termination of leave to the point at which the person is notified of a decision to remove them. From that point, people will have no access to benefits that are dependent on their leave to remain or enter.

Penalties for not following procedures. This clause enables the Secretary of State to require that applicants must follow particular procedures when making an immigration-related application or claim, with unspecified repercussions for those who do not comply.

Refugee Convention: construction. This clause extends the grounds on which the government can exclude people from asylum. The 1951 Convention already allows governments to refuse refugee protection to those engaged in terrorism, but this clause is an attempt to define this in UK law. The cumulative effect of the broad definition of terrorism in the Terrorism Act 2000 and the proposed new offences in the Terrorism Bill is the creation of a legal framework where engaging in a political opposition movement is potentially an act of terrorism and where any political refugee is at risk of being denied protection in the UK.

(Source: *Refugee Council*)

Community Regeneration Unit, Hastings Trust

The Community Regeneration Unit was set up in 2002 and differs from other current community development work because a whole team concentrates its work intensively with individual residents and hard-to-reach communities. The Unit was set up with the aim of working in a totally new and concentrated grassroots level, supporting local communities to become involved in the regeneration of the town.

Through community consultation and area based work, the following priority communities were identified:

- older people
- residents looking to set up community businesses or move into employment
- local black and minority ethnic groups
- asylum seekers and refugees

The CRU was set up in response to need and works with local people and local organisations in Hastings and St. Leonards to:

- increase residents' participation in the regeneration of their areas
- support residents to take part in decision-making and service delivery in their areas
- develop projects and community businesses/enterprises with residents that address local needs
- support community based groups to access grants and funding

Projects the Unit is working on with local residents:

Resources

- the Community Chest, Community Learning Chest grants and match-funding with Global grants
- loans scheme for people wanting to set up community enterprises e.g. food co-operative
- crisis loans to individuals in need
- helps with funding applications for grants
- support through community finance initiatives e.g. Credit Union

In the Community

- provide opportunities for local people to take part in social events and other community activities
- work to strengthen targeted community organisations
- build individual resident's confidence to access other regeneration projects
- support residents and community groups to have a voice in their community

Building Communities

- help groups to continue to run and involve more people
- increase the use of community facilities by local residents
- support more people to become and stay part of their community

The CRU works in partnership with community based regeneration workers from other agencies and key partner bodies within the public, private, voluntary and community sectors to deliver CRU objectives and provide longer term support for communities worked with.

Examples of Projects with Asylum Seekers/Refugees Facilitated by Community Regeneration Unit

Annual Multi-Cultural Five a Side Football Tournament

Each August sees the BME communities in Hastings avidly preparing their teams for the Multi-Cultural 5-A-Side Football Tournament. The tournament evolved from members of the asylum seeker, African and Bengali communities approaching the CRU to put on a tournament. The groups often played informal matches in Warrior Square Gardens and on the pitches at Bohemia Road but really wanted a larger scale event that they could all participate in. During its four years, the contest has brought together many cultures and nationalities including Bengali, Kurdish, African, Iranian and European communities. The whole tournament provides a relaxed, fun weekend, with the teams bringing along family and friends for support and encouragement.

Diversity Resource International/Community Interpreters

The Community Regeneration Unit has funded two OCN-accredited Community Interpreting Courses for local residents from black and minority ethnic communities over the previous 18 months. Further to research by the Primary Care Trust into the need for locally based trained interpreters and through discussions with local individuals with refugee status, the CRU funded the ten-week accredited interpreting courses. The course provides much needed professionally trained local interpreters and it is hoped will open up opportunities for employment which are sometimes lacking within the town. The trained interpreters then have the opportunity to become self-employed with Diversity Resources International.

According to Mebrak Ghebreweldi of Diversity Resource International (DRI) who facilitated both courses: "Language has a very important part to play in helping people settle in a new country. Through courses like this, we try to promote independence and confidence in our students. Not only can they help themselves with their new interpreting skills, but they can also help other members of ethnic communities by interpreting for schools, social services, hospitals and immigration services." More than a twenty students received their qualifications and can now offer vital interpreting skills in languages ranging from Arabic to Armenian, from Cantonese to Polish.

Directory of Services available for Asylum Seekers and Refugees

The CRU facilitates an evening Drop-In for asylum seekers and refugees at the WRVS in South Street. Repeatedly, individuals who attended the Drop-In were unaware of what services they could access in the town. This led to the CRU commissioning a Directory of Services for Asylum Seekers and Refugees. There is currently no other directory which enables asylum seekers and refugees to know what services they can access in the town, previously they would find this information on an ad-hoc basis.

Report on the Needs of Asylum Seekers and Refugees

In tandem with the Directory of Services, the CRU commissioned a consultant (a refugee himself) to research the needs of asylum seekers and refugees in Hastings. This enabled the CRU and other agencies with a remit to work with these communities to build up a picture of any gaps in provision or any trends which would help to provide a targeted service provision. Both of these publications were instrumental in discovering gaps in provision (two examples being the gap in provision for trauma counselling and reporting racial incidents locally).

Asylum Seeker/Refugee Drop-In

The Asylum Seeker and Refugee Drop-In on Monday evenings is a mix of cooking, games and music. The Drop-In, developed in partnership with Pulse and the Youth Development Service, is a chance for the participants to cook up dishes from their own countries, chat over their life stories and their lives in Hastings and have fun drumming, singing and playing games. Sharing cultures and spending time together is bonding for all in the group. Other service-providers come along and provide activities as requested by the attendees. The Drop-In continued to develop, with workshops in computer music making from Sound Architect and the development of a community African Drumming group (Meli Melo).

Meli Melo

Regular members of the Drop-In showed an interest in drumming, singing and dancing and as a result of this, formed the band Meli Melo (meaning mish mash/mixture). The band has been involved in charity events, playing at the Four Corners Festival, Hastings Beach Concert and a charity event in Lewes. The band feel that this enables them to give something back to the local community who have made them feel so welcome in Hastings and St Leonards.

Green Team

The Community Regeneration Unit teamed up with Hastings Trust's Environmental Initiatives project to form 'The Green Team'. There are very strict guidelines on volunteering and employment for asylum seekers and many individuals were upset because they had a lot of time on their hands and little they were allowed to do. This also reinforced the negative stereotype that asylum seekers are a drain on the economy. Individuals felt that they had been made to feel welcome by the local community and wanted to show that they were interested in contributing their time to the local community. Current projects include on-going maintenance of the grounds at St Mary Magdalene church in St Leonards and a new project, clearing and renovating the grounds of London Road Congregational church on Pevensey Road.

Refugee Placement

The CRU piloted an innovative work placement scheme for refugees. The placement is a paid position and works on a rolling programme of 13 weeks, where refugees who may not have work experience in the UK can gain valuable skills and experience to enable them to be more confident when applying for jobs. So far, 3 refugees have completed the placement, gaining valuable work experience and confidence, whilst providing admin support to the CRU.

Refugees and Older People

Working with Older People has always been part of the work of the CRU— whether through supporting resident associations, linking with other agencies working with older people or supporting various clubs for older people. The CRU sought to bring together members of the Seniors Forum and local asylum seekers and refugees in June 2006 in order to share experiences and skills. The first event was a workshop learning African drumming skills. This was followed later by a session on barge painting and an afternoon Beetle Drive.

Funding Support

Between 2002 and 2006, the CRU administered two grant schemes: Community Chest and Community Learning Chest, with matchfunding from ESCC Global Grants scheme. The Community Chest is a grant scheme which aims to support local community activity. The Community Learning Chest aims to develop the skills and knowledge of local people delivering neighbourhood renewal who don't have access to other funding. Global Grants aims to help local groups educate, train or assist local people to gain new skills that will help them to move towards gaining employment. They both provide grants of between £50 and £5,000 to improve the quality of life for some of the most deprived areas. A few of the aims of the schemes are:

- To help BME and other communities explore their history, their cultures and their traditions
- Through better understanding of cultural diversity, promote racial harmony and community cohesion.
- To support any other activities by which local community and voluntary groups can contribute to the regeneration of their local area.

Staff of the CRU helped BME communities through the application process, from ascertaining the needs of the group, researching suppliers, completing the application form, completing the monitoring of successful applications, ensuring governing documents and financial records were sufficient etc. United African Community in Hastings, Kivu Peace Initiative and Ark of Hope are just a few examples of BME groups who have received funding from the schemes.

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