

EXODUSZINE.CO.UK

ISSUE  
10

I never expected  
to be a refugee

Portraits of courage

Spotlight on LGBTQ+  
sanctuary-seekers

EXODUS

Produced for the community by people seeking sanctuary

## In this issue

|                                 |             |
|---------------------------------|-------------|
| <b>LGBTQ+ spotlight</b>         | <b>P4-5</b> |
| <b>New Sanctuary Café</b>       | <b>P6</b>   |
| <b>First person</b>             | <b>P7</b>   |
| <b>Portraits of courage</b>     | <b>P8-9</b> |
| <b>Solidarity with refugees</b> | <b>P11</b>  |
| <b>Refugee stories</b>          | <b>P13</b>  |
| <b>30 years of welcomes</b>     | <b>P15</b>  |
| <b>Community integration</b>    | <b>P17</b>  |
| <b>Human rights</b>             | <b>P18</b>  |
| <b>Rise of the far right</b>    | <b>P21</b>  |
| <b>Modern slavery</b>           | <b>P22</b>  |



Exodus is a non-profit magazine produced by a small group of volunteers to give a voice to refugees seeking a new life in the UK.

Exodus team and regular contributors:

Jean-Marc Hall, Souran Soleimani, Helen Ball, Tamirat Astatkie, Kynz, Vahid Moghaddami Talemi, Sam Jonkers and Martin Trepte.

Email: [exodusfanzine@gmail.com](mailto:exodusfanzine@gmail.com)

Web: <https://exoduszine.co.uk/>

Facebook: [Exodus Fanzine](#)

## Welcome to our milestone tenth issue

EXODUS reaches a landmark moment with its latest publication. It marks the tenth issue of a magazine that champions impartiality, equity and justice, and giving a voice to those seeking sanctuary in the UK.

Over the last nine issues more than 200 contributions from refugees, people seeking asylum, and humanitarian organisations have been published — all raising awareness and building public understanding of why people seek sanctuary in the UK. And all helping to put a human face on people often described as just numbers.

Exodus is not silent in its resolve to inform, help reshape the narrative, and create a fair and compassionate society among the communities we live in.

Together with charities, aid organisations and NGOs, Exodus has forged a humanitarian alliance with those who share our common cause.

Facing a changing and increasingly hostile political climate, Exodus remains determined to inform and educate communities about why people are seeking sanctuary — giving them the facts and real stories obscured by the myths, toxic narrative and deliberate misinformation and disinformation pumped out by the right-wing media. The magazine is put together

entirely by volunteers driven by a shared passion for truth and fairness and fuelled entirely by goodwill.

We have no budget and don't seek one — thanks to the digital world we live in we are able to produce and distribute the magazine at no cost apart from our time and energy and that of our wonderful contributors who share our vision.

To have reached our tenth issue is a testament to our small team and everyone who has supported us with articles, encouraged our mission and helped spread the word about the magazine.

To everyone who has backed us in so many ways — thank you.

We hope you find issue 10 engaging and informative and that you find time to share these stories of hope, resilience, insight and compassion.

To do so has never been more important than it is now. We have some great first person articles that show the fortitude and bravery of people who have lost everything and have rebuilt their lives from scratch — people who have become assets to their communities—not a burden.

Here's to the next 10 issues of telling the real stories of those seeking sanctuary in the UK!

**Jean-Marc Hall**  
Exodus Project Co-ordinator

## Building bridges of understanding between people

A MUSICAL visionary from Fawley near Henley strove to bring unity through music with an Israeli-Palestinian concert in London, writes **Melissa Paulden**.

Andrew Leslau, a prison reform mentor, helped bring together leading voices from both communities in a bid to shine a light on what is possible when people connect through song.

The 'Universe' concert was a one-night celebration at the Liberal Jewish Synagogue in St John's Wood, London.

It featured solos and collaborations alongside the voices of refugee group, the Citizens of the World Choir.

For Mr Leslau, the concert was to build bridges of understanding between people.

He said: "After October 7, I was very keen to get Muslims and Jews to walk together. As hard as I tried, I initially hit walls because people felt 'it wasn't the right time'. But I believed the exact opposite. I knew this was precisely the moment we needed it most."

Further inspiration came from Mr

Leslau's work mentoring former offenders. Among those he guided was Rosca Onya, a former refugee from the Democratic Republic of the Congo, who rebuilt his life after 10 years in prison.

Today, Mr Onya is an associate artist with the Citizens of the World Choir and a Glastonbury Festival performer. He introduced Mr Leslau to the choir, which celebrates the artistry, heritage and humanity of people seeking sanctuary.

Inspired by the choir's energy, Mr Leslau approached its founder and director, Becky Dell, with the idea of a concert.

He said: "I pitched the idea of creating something that beautifully intertwined Palestinian and Israeli, Muslim and Jewish voices, and she instantly said 'yes'."

The line-up also featured Palestinian-Israeli singer, songwriter and peace activist Mira Awad.

The concert ended on a joyful high with the Zulu folksong *Siyahamba*, which had the entire audience on its feet, clapping, singing and celebrating together.



**Andrew Leslau, from Hawley, who organised the Universe concert with the Citizens of the World Choir in London to help bring Palestinians and Israelis closer together.**

Picture: Henley Standard

# Rebuilding a life after migration, loss and injury

MY JOURNEY as a black Cameroonian migrant woman and mother of four explores what can happen when the life you have worked so hard to build is suddenly changed by injury, disability and circumstances beyond your control.

I came to the United Kingdom carrying hopes for my family and a determination to build a secure future. I worked, contributed to my community and spent years caring for others through my professional work in health and social care.

Then a serious workplace injury changed the direction of my life.

The consequences reached far beyond the physical injury. I experienced the loss of employment, financial security, independence, control over my body and many of the things that had once given me purpose, dignity and stability.

I continue to live with the consequences and remain under care, while my children and partner have also supported me through a period that has affected our whole family.

But this is not simply a story about what was lost. It is a story about what happened next.

An important part of that journey has been learning to accept my new condition and support.

At different stages of my journey, multidisciplinary health professionals, my children's schools, social services, my local council and its services have played a meaningful role in helping me and my family navigate life after injury and disability.

This has included support from the Reablement Team, a long-term care package, the Housing and Homelessness



**Josy Kameni.** Photo credit: Onyxbyleesha

Team, Young Carers support and counselling support for my children.

These forms of support may sound practical, but when a family is navigating injury, disability, financial pressure, housing uncertainty and major changes to everyday life, practical support can become a lifeline.

I suddenly found myself in need of that support after spending years being the person who cared for others.

My situation also brought into focus the importance of my children, my partner, sister, my family, my community and my professional network, including people who continued to recognise my abilities and potential when circumstances could easily have reduced me to my injury or vulnerability.

Yet my story is not defined solely by adversity. Slowly, another part of my life began to

emerge. I nurtured my passion for writing and have now published books. Through writing, I began transforming experiences of migration, identity, resilience, systemic abuse, belonging and injustice into stories that could reach other people.

My work has since been published internationally and has entered significant academic and cultural collections, including the London School of Economics Library Collection, the Indie International Collection on BiblioBoard and the Wellcome Collection.

I have developed creative and cultural organisations and projects, spoken internationally, and begun developing my literary intellectual property for television and film.

I am also part of the Momentum 2026/27 cohort, where I am developing My Body Was the Contract for screen

and learning how to navigate an industry that is entirely new to me. Most recently, I had the privilege of contributing remotely to the IFLA World Library and Information Congress in Busan 2026, speaking about libraries as spaces of emotional and cultural resilience for migrant and marginalised communities. These achievements do not erase the difficulties I continue to live with.

Rather, they have taught me something I now understand very deeply: that a person can be profoundly affected by what happens to them without being defined by it.

What happens when a person who has spent years caring for others suddenly needs care herself? Can a life be rebuilt differently after everything changes?

My answer, from where I stand today, is 'yes'. Not perfectly. Not without help. Not without setbacks.

But through family, public support, community, professional relationships, creativity and the decision to keep creating, a different future can begin to take shape.

Migration does not erase identity, disability does not erase contribution, needing help does not erase dignity, and a disrupted life can still become a meaningful one.

I believe my journey reflects many of the themes that affect those seeking sanctuary in the UK - displacement, identity, motherhood, resilience, injustice, hope, belonging and the determination to rebuild despite extraordinary challenges.

More importantly, I believe it speaks to the strength and humanity that often emerge in the face of adversity.

**Josy Kameni**

# *Safety is the beginning of a much longer journey*

## Supporting those who have spent their lives hiding who they are

FOR many LGBTQ+ asylum seekers arriving in the UK, the journey to safety is only the beginning of a much longer road.

Many have fled countries where their identity has made them a target — facing persecution, violence, and rejection not only from governments and wider society, but often from their own families.

In some cases, simply being who they are has put their lives at risk. The courage it takes to leave everything behind under those circumstances is difficult to fully comprehend.

Arriving in the UK, a comparatively inclusive and accepting environment, can therefore feel deeply unfamiliar.

For people who may have spent their

entire lives hiding who they are, the freedom to exist openly can be as disorientating as it is liberating.

It is often here, perhaps for the first time, that they begin to explore their sexuality or gender identity without fear. And one of the most important parts of that process is the simple but powerful realisation that they are not alone.

That is where the Care4Calais LGBTQ+ Support Group steps in.

Run by volunteers from the charity, the group exists to provide a safe and inclusive space where LGBTQ+ asylum seekers can find something that is vital: friendship.

At its heart, the group is about human connection, about creating a community

where people feel seen, welcomed, and free to be themselves, sometimes for the first time in a very long time.

The group runs regular events in London bringing asylum seekers together to meet, socialise, and build bonds with others who understand their experiences.

But the support does not stop there. Online assistance is also available for those dealing with specific LGBTQ+ issues or broader asylum seeker concerns, ensuring that help is accessible no matter where someone is located.

Over the past few years, the group carried out various activities to bring together asylum seekers, like attending QPR matches as part of the Football v Homophobia campaign, a powerful reminder that sport can be a force for inclusion and dignity.

The group has also collaborated closely with the West London Queer Project, attending and promoting their events to help members access an even wider network of community and support.

Meet-ups in local parks around the Heathrow and Hounslow area have offered a more informal setting for people to connect and unwind.

And each year, one of the most joyful highlights on the calendar is attending Pride in London. For asylum seekers who may have faced persecution for their identity, walking freely and proudly at Pride is a profoundly moving experience — a celebration of who they are, surrounded by community.

Through befriending services, events, and online support, the Care4Calais LGBTQ+ Support Group is doing something remarkable: reminding people that they are not alone, and that they belong.

If you would like to help the work of the support group, a contribution of just £15 can go towards a person's travel and food costs, helping them access these vital community events.

You can donate at: <https://care4calais.enthuse.com/pf/c4cslough-91d29>

Credit: 74534949@N00, CC BY 4.0 <<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>>, via Wikimedia Commons



Thousands of colourful participants flocked to the capital to take part in the 2026 London Pride celebrations.



Rio pictured at Pride in 2025, left, and again at the event this year feeling more confident and at home. Photo: Rio

# *'The UK has given me the chance to become myself'*

## Pride promises a sanctuary for people fleeing oppression

LONDON Pride celebrated a massive return to the streets attracting more than 35,000 people who marched in solidarity through the capital.

The event centred around celebrations and protests highlighting serious issues, including NHS gender-affirming care and the loss of local LGBTQ+ social and music venues.

Festival-goers enjoyed music and speeches across London, as the day's festivities concluded with the question: "Why is London Pride Day so important?"

LGBTQ+ people seeking asylum to escape persecution and imprisonment in their home countries have found the UK a safe shelter.

The lack of protection from their rela-

tive governments, coupled with oppressive laws and criminality of same sex relationships forces people to live in constant fear.

**'Home is not a place yet.  
But for one day —  
surrounded by flags and  
strangers who felt like  
family — I was home'**

In some countries, homosexuality can be punished with the death penalty. And with constant state sanctioned stigma, arrest and physical assault are endorsed

by the local police and authorities.

Rio came to the UK seeking sanctuary. He said: "As an asylum seeker, I live with uncertainty. But at Pride, I live with certainty about who I am. Home is not a place yet. But for one day in London, surrounded by flags and strangers who felt like family, I was home.

"Two Prides - 2025 to 2026 - two years of waiting for my asylum claim.

"The system is slow and the fear does not just disappear.

"But these photos show something else too: I kept choosing joy. In the first one I'm still unsure. In the later ones, I am standing taller.

"That's what the UK gave me - the chance to become myself."

# Coffee with greater purpose

New venue in centre of Reading will be hub for refugee support



The Mayor of Reading, Councillor Paul Gittings, officially opened the new Sanctuary Café in Reading in July.



The café includes an exhibition space which is currently displaying Portraits of Resilience, a photographic exhibition celebrating the stories of sanctuary-seekers who enrich our community.

A VERY special event in Reading was hosted by Reading Refugee Support Group in July as the new Sanctuary Café was officially opened.

Located in the heart of Reading, Sanctuary Café is a welcoming community space designed to foster connection, creativity, and opportunity. Open to the public each morning, the café will serve great coffee with a greater purpose, with every purchase helping to support sanctuary-seekers rebuilding their lives in Berkshire.

In the afternoons, the space will become a hub for Reading Refugee Support Group's drop-in services and community activities, providing practical support and a place where people can connect, learn and thrive.

The café includes an exhibition space which is currently displaying

Portraits of Resilience, a powerful photographic exhibition touring Berkshire.

This exhibition has been created in partnership with JJ Keith & Open Britain: Portrait of a Diverse Nation.

The exhibition celebrates the stories, talents and contributions of sanctuary-seekers who enrich our community.

See [Reading Refugee Support group's instagram page](#) where they are sharing every portrait — they are beautiful.

You can find the Sanctuary Café at 35–39 London Street, Reading, where every meal, coffee, and conversation helps create connections and supports people starting fresh in Berkshire.

It is open Tuesday-Friday 8am-2pm, and Saturday 8am-4pm.

Helen Ball



# *'I didn't choose to be a refugee'*

I NEVER dreamed of becoming a refugee.

No child grows up wishing to flee their home, leave behind their family, or cross borders carrying nothing but fear and hope.

Becoming a refugee was never my ambition. It was the last option left to me.

When I arrived in the United Kingdom, I did not come looking for a life of dependence.

I came looking for safety.

I had already paid a price that cannot be measured in money. I had lost my home, my career, my community, and the certainty that tomorrow would come. Like so many others, I carried invisible wounds that no border could erase.

While my asylum claim was being processed, I was not allowed to work.

I wanted to contribute. I wanted to earn my own living, pay taxes, and rebuild my life with dignity.

Instead, I had no choice but to rely on the support provided by the system. It was never a privilege. It was survival.

Now I am told that I should repay the cost of that support – perhaps around £10,000.

I ask one simple question: how can someone be expected to repay a debt for a period during which they were legally for-

bidden from earning the money to avoid it?

This proposal feels less like accountability and more like punishment.

Punishment for surviving.

Punishment for escaping war, persecution, or violence.

Punishment for accepting the only help available when there was no legal alternative.

Refugees do not arrive with empty hands because they lack ambition. We

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**'How can we be expected to repay a debt for a time we were legally forbidden from earning the money to avoid it?'**

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arrive with empty hands because we have already lost everything else.

Most of us want the same ordinary things that everyone wants: a safe place to sleep, meaningful work, the chance to raise our children in peace, and the opportunity to give back to the society that welcomed us. Burdening people with signifi-

cant debt at the very beginning of their new lives does not encourage integration.

It delays it.

Instead of helping refugees become independent more quickly, it risks trapping families in financial hardship, anxiety, and uncertainty for years.

It sends a painful message that even after finding safety, the cost of surviving must still be repaid.

The United Kingdom has a proud history of offering refuge to those fleeing danger. That tradition has never been defined simply by opening a border. It has been defined by recognising the humanity of those who arrive.

Compassion is not weakness. It is one of the strongest values a society can uphold.

I do not ask for special treatment.

I ask only for the chance to rebuild my life without beginning it under the weight of a debt I never chose to incur.

One day, I hope to look back and say that Britain was not just the country that saved my life, but the country that gave me the opportunity to live it with dignity.

That is not only good for refugees.

It is good for all of us.



Mayor of Blackburn, Cllr Mahfooz Hussain, with the portrait of photographer Dayapriya who helped create the exhibition.

# Refugee lives through a lens

## Exhibition lets sanctuary-seekers tell own stories in own words

“I became interested in photography at a young age, because my father was a photographer and there were always cameras around the house.”

For decades, **Dayapriya** documented history in Sri Lanka — witnessing civil unrest through his father’s lens as a child, eventually rising to become head of the photography division for the government’s Department of Information. He photographed presidents. He travelled the world on official assignments.

Then in 2024, the political party whose rebellion he had photographed 40 years earlier came to power. They commanded him to stand as a witness against those who had crushed them.

“I could not do this because I saw atrocities being committed on both sides. They threatened to kill me and my family. Finally I had to escape for my life.”

He arrived in the UK on a visitor’s visa and claimed political asylum. He is still waiting.

“I am a family man. I love my wife and my two children. Being apart from them is the hardest challenge. I am here in England because I want to fight to bring my

family to safety.” In the meantime, he picked up his camera again — and handed his expertise to others.

Portraits of Courage is a photography exhibition featuring 20 sanctuary-seekers living in Blackburn with Darwen. It ran at Blackburn Cathedral during Refugee Week 2026 and, due to an extraordinary public response, was extended until 25 June.

The project grew out of weekly creative workshops run by Kairos Housing in which participants were invited to tell their own stories, in their own words, on their own terms.

Dayapriya, drawing on his lifetime of professional expertise, mentored fellow participants through the photography sessions — teaching technique, framing, and the art of telling a story through a lens.

Each portrait panel featured a QR code; scan it and you heard the participant’s own voice. These were not the stories of strangers but the stories of neighbours, colleagues and friends who make up the vibrant community that calls Blackburn with Darwen home.

**Darman** served in the Afghan army alongside British and NATO forces, eventually qualifying as a military engineer in Ban-

galore in 2017. “When the Taliban took back control I had to leave my country immediately. I had no money, and I had to hide in the mountains because the Taliban were looking for me. Eventually, after 11 days walking, I crossed into Pakistan. I felt I had a 99 per cent chance of dying as I had no food or water, and the land was dry.

“I then went on to cross 13 different countries before arriving in England. I was jailed in four of these countries. In Italy, I was kept in an overcrowded cell with other migrants who hadn’t been fed for three days. I complained to the commander. I told him about my service to the army and UN human rights organisations, and he let us all go.

“During this journey, my motivation was to just keep myself alive. I believe that we should always strive for a better life. I use poetry as an instrument to convey my messages to people who don’t know about the meaning of life. I play harmonium, and through music I feel deep explosions in my heart. Music and poetry are brother and sister. I want to train as a nurse now, helping vulnerable people and giving them peace, which will give me peace.

Continued on next page



A selection of portraits and messages from the exhibition which was so popular it had to be extended and now may go on tour.

## Inspiring stories which help the public see migrants as people

Continued from previous page

"Making others happy is the biggest wealth for me. We must prove our humanity."

**Sadiq** was born in Erbil, Iraq, in 1988.

"My mother was like both parents to me. I remember when I was five years old, travelling with her on the bus to Mosul, where she would buy 25 gallons of petrol to take back home to sell.

"At the checkpoint, soldiers would come onto the bus and search everybody. My mother would have to hide the petrol container under her hijab. If the soldiers found the petrol, they would take it from her and empty it in the street. I remember my mother always being in fear and crying.

"We had no money, there were no shops and the economy had collapsed. We just lived off naan bread and yoghurt every day, three times a day.

"In 1995, my mother and I had to flee for our lives. I remember running with a duvet over my head. My mother gave me this to protect me from being shot. There were bullets flying all around us as we ran through the streets. We eventually found safety in an underground shelter."

At 25, Sadiq had to flee again.

"I walked to my front door, not knowing what I would find on the other side. It took me two months to get to the UK, fleeing across several countries by myself. It was

very risky and dangerous. I often went for days without food."

He has now been in England for 12 years, still awaiting the outcome of his asylum appeal. "It felt like I was living in a prison in Iraq, and now it feels like I live in a big cage here. If you do not have refugee status, you cannot work, you cannot do anything. You have hardly any money and you cannot go forward with your life.

**'These voices continue to challenge narratives, amplify truth, and call for a more compassionate world.'**

"I keep going for the people that love me. It also helps me to cope when I think that I am not the only one in this situation."

Visitors to the exhibition were invited to add their own messages to a Wall of Welcome inside the Cathedral. It has not stopped growing.

"Inspiring stories from wonderful people. Welcome to Blackburn." — David Collinge, High Sheriff of Lancashire

"Thank you for sharing your stories and

helping us to see a person."

"You are precious, you are loved and you are welcome."

"I hope you find peace."

And then — pinned among them — a card from one of the participants themselves: "Update: I have recently received my status as a refugee! Happy I can stay!"

"The wall kept growing. People came back, bringing others.

The exhibition was due to close after one week. Public demand meant it could not.

Portraits of Courage is hoping to tour in the future. If you would like to host the exhibition, please get in touch via the online address below.

Here you can also read more about the exhibition, watch a behind-the-scenes documentary and order a copy of the exhibition book to support the charity's work.

By preserving these stories in an exhibition, and now on these pages, these voices continue to challenge narratives, amplify truth, and call for a more compassionate world.

These are not the words of victims. They are the stories of courage of our neighbours, colleagues and friends. For more information please see: <https://www.kairoshousing.org.uk/portraits-of-courage.html>

Lisa Norcross

# *Helping reporters fleeing tyranny to rebuild careers*

## Charity launches scholarship in partnership with London university

Picture: Rory Peck Trust.

A CHARITY has launched a new scholarship to help freelance journalists-in-exile rebuild their careers in the UK.

The Rory Peck Trust, which supports freelance reporters around the world, says thousands of journalists have been driven from their home countries because of their reporting.

Some have been expelled by governments; others have fled persecution, arbitrary detention or threats to their lives. The number forced into exile has risen sharply in recent years.

Around half of the journalists seeking support from the Rory Peck Trust today are freelancers who have either fled their countries or are trying to escape. While many hope their exile will be temporary, the reality is often very different: what begins as a short-term refuge can become a permanent reality.

In a series of workshops hosted by the Trust, exiled journalists now living in the UK told how they all faced significant barriers to continuing their careers.

Qualifications were not always recognised, professional networks had disappeared, and many struggled to gain a foothold in the UK media industry.

So, from September, the Rory Peck Trust is partnering with City St George's, University of London, to enable one journalist-in-exile to complete an MA in International Journalism.

Jon Williams, executive director of the Rory Peck Trust, said: "For many of those, their journalism is the reason they are here. They have been forced to flee after exposing stories others wanted kept hidden. They are talented, courageous journalists who simply need the opportunity to demonstrate what they can do.

"This scholarship will help them rebuild their careers, create new professional networks and ensure their journalism has a future, thousands of miles from home."

The intensive one-year Master's programme combines practical training across broadcast, print and digital journalism with advanced study of international reporting,



equipping students with the skills needed for today's global media landscape.

Dr Zahera Harb, director of postgraduate studies at City St George's, knows firsthand the challenges faced by journalists forced to leave home.

Before moving to the UK, she spent more than a decade reporting and presenting in Lebanon.

**'This scholarship will help them rebuild their careers and ensure their journalism has a future, thousands of miles from home'.**

She said: "We're incredibly excited about this partnership with the Rory Peck Trust and the opportunities it will create to support journalists in exile.

"It will equip them with the knowledge, professional networks and global perspec-

tive needed to build a successful career, helping them overcome the professional disruption caused by displacement and exile."

The scheme is open to freelance journalists living in exile, displaced, or at risk because of their journalism.

They must meet City St George's academic and English language entry requirements and hold an immigration status that permits study in the UK. The inaugural Rory Peck Scholar was set to be announced in the autumn. Mr Williams hopes the scholarship will become the first step in a broader programme of support for journalists forced into exile.

He said: "Journalism is built on community as much as competition. Journalists rely on one another for advice, support and shared experience.

"That sense of professional solidarity becomes even more important when someone has been forced to leave everything behind. This scholarship is about more than education. It's about helping outstanding journalists belong again – about protecting independent journalism."



# What would you pack if you suddenly had to leave?

## Reading Amnesty group raises awareness of why people flee

DURING Refugee Week, members of the Reading Amnesty Group shared a range of photos showing their solidarity for refugees and asylum seekers.

They took photos at some famous landmarks in Reading, so the town can be identified as a welcoming place for new friends.

The pictures were shared with the Reading Refugee Support Group, Reading's City of Sanctuary and Care4Calais Thames Valley, so the area's refugee charities could in turn share them with their clients.

Amnesty hopes this gives them a sense of welcome from their new community.

This year, the Reading Amnesty International Group is focussing its local community work on raising awareness of how and why people become refugees and asylum seekers.

The group's 'Pack a Bag' activity gives people a moment of contemplation – what would they pack if they suddenly had to leave their home and never return?

It starts some very thoughtful conversations as people realise the almost impossible situation individuals and families find themselves in.

The Reading Amnesty International group also encourages people to leave messages of welcome for local refugees and asylum seekers – which it passed to the Reading Refugee Support Group later in the summer.

To find out more about the work of the Reading Amnesty International Group see: <https://www.amnesty.org.uk/get-involved/join-the-movement/join-a-group-or-network/reading/>





# Mixed migration messaging

## Government pledges safe routes but plans detention at army sites

HOME Secretary Shabana Mahmood has pledged to introduce new safe and legal routes later this year.

Motivated by Canada's Community Sponsorship Scheme that was introduced in 1979, the Government is becoming more desperate to reduce the number of people seeking asylum who are being housed in hotels.

With pressure on the Government to create safe and legal routes, such as the Afghan Citizens Resettlement Scheme (now closed to new applicants), the Community Sponsorship Alliance (CSA) has co-ordinated a network of local community groups that take direct responsibility for welcoming refugees and people seeking asylum.

Working with the Government as a strategic partner and critical advisor, it would allow organisations such as community groups and churches to support those who arrive and to provide help to find housing and employment.

It will help to decide who they will sponsor under the new scheme.

Alarmingly and conversely, in an effort to end the use of asylum hotels, the Gov-

ernment has formally submitted planning requests to house 3,750 asylum seekers across three former military sites.

The 'basic' accommodation is based at three Ministry of Defence sites: MOD Bicester in Oxfordshire, RAF Barnham in Suffolk, and RAF Linton-on-Ouse in Yorkshire.

In addition to these 'new' sites, existing locations are being expanded.

These plans have been condemned by humanitarian groups including Care4Calais and Asylum Welcome.

Local councils and MPs have voiced concerns, arguing that isolating vulnerable people on remote military bases is re-traumatising and harmful to their well-being. Safe routes and sponsorship of refu-

gees helps build lives in the UK.

Putting people in disused military bases in remote areas only de-humanises and is counter to the 1951 Refugee Convention, legally bound to consider asylum claims.

In 2022 the Nationality and Borders Bill set out the then Government's plan for immigration and asylum laws in the UK.

Unfortunately, the 'Act' undermined the right to seek asylum in several ways and the United Nations High Commission for Human Rights (UNHCR) has said that some provisions are in breach of the Refugee Convention, including military bases that house people seeking asylum in squalid conditions, in isolated areas and restricting freedom.

With last year's attempt to emulate Denmark's strict asylum policies, can Home Secretary Shabana Mahmood be trusted to implement any kind of humanitarian schemes she puts forward?

Whatever decisions she has made during her tenure, it has been shown that they are clearly ethically uncompromising, even under the leadership of a new prime minister.

### Migration facts

Home Office figures show that Net migration fell 48 per cent to 171,000 last year and asylum applications fell by 12 per cent to 95,000. they also revealed a rise of seven per cent (39,000) in deportations and a 37 per cent (11,500) fall in arrivals by small boat.

# *Journey fraught with risks for rights denied at home*

## Forced to flee homeland in search of basic human dignity

Credit: Bedoonmedia, CC BY-SA 3.0 <<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/3.0/>>, via Wikimedia Commons

I AM **Mohammed** from Kuwait, from the Bedoon community.

I lived with my family in the desert and I never received my rights — not me, nor my family, nor my wife, nor my children.

I lived in my own country like a homeless person with no rights. I suffered greatly, and neither my simplest dreams nor my children's dreams came true.

My simplest dream is a paper proving I am a Kuwaiti citizen, and a house for me and my family to live in.

I have no right to travel, I don't own a car, and I have no right to education or hospital treatment.

I lost my first wife after she gave birth to my child. She had a haemorrhage and died in front of my eyes while I was helpless and could not do anything.

I took part in demonstrations demanding my rights, and we faced repression.

I became wanted by state security, so I fled to the desert, again out of fear. I stayed there for nearly two to three years, far from my family.

I decided to migrate for the sake of my family and my six children, because I don't want what happened to me to happen to them. I travelled to Tur-



**Members of the Bedoon community in Kuwait demonstrate for improved rights.**

key through people-smuggling, and from Turkey I went to Greece.

While crossing, I almost drowned in the sea and said to myself: Is this where my dreams and my family's dreams end? I don't know how I got out of the sea.

We climbed mountains in Greece, and after poor treatment by the police, they put us in prison with around 200 people, including women and children. We received one meal a

day. After that, they transferred us to a camp, and we suffered a lot there too.

After leaving the camp, I slept on the street, ate from trash, and drank from park water. My mental state hit rock bottom. I cried day and night, feeling oppressed, wounded, and hopeless, not knowing where to go.

I eventually made it to London and said: Here they will give me my rights.

But I was shocked when my

asylum request was rejected, which worsened my mental state even more.

I now suffer from irritable bowel syndrome and migraines, and I have a slipped disc and osteoarthritis in my foot.

To this day, my mental state is at zero.

I have shortened my words because of my mental state, and I don't want to mention the other terrible things I went through in my life. This is just a small summary.

## **Repressed minority categorised as illegal residents in their own country**

THE Bedoon - short for bidoon jinsiya, meaning 'without nationality' in Arabic - are a stateless Arab minority numbering roughly 80,000 to 120,000 in Kuwait.

They descended largely from nomadic tribes who were not registered as citizens when Kuwait gained independence in 1961. Many missed early registration

deadlines or lived outside urban centres during the initial formation of citizenship rolls.

Today the Kuwaiti state categorises the Bedoon as illegal residents rather than citizens.

The group faces daily challenges such as difficulties securing civil documents,

like official birth, marriage, or death certificates, and limited or restricted access to state-subsidized services like healthcare, higher education, and formal legal employment.

They are also subject to restrictions to temporary travel documents for medical or educational needs abroad.

# *Paying the ultimate price for seeking sanctuary*

## Couple lose their unborn baby after perilous journey to UK

Picture: Mstyslav Chernov/Unframe. Creative Commons Attribution-Share Alike 4.0.



NOTHING illustrates the human toll of seeking sanctuary on some asylum seekers more than the story of a young Eritrean couple who lost their unborn baby shortly after reaching the UK.

Yonas, a 25-year-old Eritrean, fled his home town near the capital, Asmara, with his 20-year-old pregnant wife, Luwam.

They travelled through Ethiopia to Sudan and across the Sahara Desert into Libya, risking exploitation, detention and trafficking, finally surviving the treacherous Mediterranean crossing to Italy.

From Italy they travelled on through Spain and France until reaching Calais and crossing to England.

After surviving the small boat crossing, during which two adults and a baby drowned, they were processed and checked by Border Force and then were moved to temporary accommodation awaiting their asylum claim.

It was here that Luwam was rushed to hospital and suffered a miscarriage. The punishing journey and stress severely dam-

aged her health, and the couple were deprived of the baby they had hoped for.

They had paid the ultimate cost of their decision to seek sanctuary and a peaceful life in the UK.

Eritrea is a country bordered by Sudan, Ethiopia and Djibouti and features a coast-

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**‘The punishing journey and stress had severely damaged her health, and the couple were deprived of their baby.’**

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line along the Red Sea. The nation has a population of nearly four million and as much as one third of Eritreans are estimated to live abroad. The nation gained independence in 1993 and its capital, Asmara, is multi-lingual with no official language, although English is widely used.

The population is split between Christianity and Islam and they live together peacefully.

Many Eritreans come to the UK because of its historical links and the English language, but the primary cause for seeking asylum is to escape human rights abuses, indefinite military conscription, arbitrary detention, torture and repression under an authoritarian regime.

Tensions between Eritrea and Ethiopia have worsened significantly following disputes over access to the Red Sea, after the ‘Badme War’ that took place from 1998 to 2000.

With circumstances like these, it is no wonder why Eritreans make the dangerous decision to seek asylum and sanctuary abroad.

The routes from Eritrea to Europe are considered the most risky, leaving refugees at the mercy of people smugglers, new civil conflicts and harsh conditions caused by continuing global warming.

**Jean-Marc Hall**



**Asylum Welcome co-founder Diana Tickell (front row, centre-left) with friends and supporters at Asylum Welcome's 30th anniversary celebrations.** Photo: Martin Stott.

# *Thirty years of welcomes*

## Timeline tells story of three decades of support for refugees

THREE decades of welcome, solidarity and community have been celebrated in Oxford as Asylum Welcome marked its 30th anniversary at a special AGM and Supporters' Meeting with clients, former clients, volunteers, staff, trustees and supporters.

Friday, September 25, marked 30 years since Asylum Welcome became a registered charity, although its roots stretch back further. Over the past 30 years, it has grown from one room into a regional organisation providing practical support, advice and advocacy to refugees, asylum seekers and vulnerable migrants across Oxfordshire.

The celebrations at St Clement's Family Centre began to the sound of Kurdish singing and drumming, setting the tone for a packed evening bringing together people from across Asylum Welcome's 30-year history.

Following a welcome and reflections from joint CEOs Hari Reed and Sarah Totterdell, guests saw the premiere of a new film about Asylum Welcome, made pro

bono by local filmmaker Tim Hand and bringing together the voices of clients, volunteers and staff. At the heart of the evening was a 'Human Timeline', telling Asylum Welcome's 30-year story through the people who have been part of it.

The Timeline began by recognising two people whose involvement reaches back to the organisation's earliest beginnings: Diana Tickell, one of Asylum Welcome's founders, whose involvement goes back to Refugees in Oxford in 1991; and Alasdair MacKenzie KC, who was involved in the campaign against Campsfield detention centre from its earliest days in 1993.

From there, contributors took the audience through three decades of memories. A former client shared his powerful story of fleeing Afghanistan and being reunited with his family.

A volunteer remembered welcoming Syrian families to Oxford and seeing friendships and a new community begin to form, while a former youth service coordinator reflected on supporting young

people separated from family members and the life-changing impact of family reunion.

One of the most moving moments of the evening came from a former client who first came to Asylum Welcome around 25 years ago. He spoke powerfully and emotionally about his experiences and the journey his life has taken since.

Tony Samuel, co-chair of Asylum Welcome, said: "It was fantastic to see so many supporters there — and so many highlights. It really was a memorable evening."

As it enters its fourth decade, Asylum Welcome remains committed to welcoming and standing alongside people seeking safety, responding to changing needs and ensuring the voices and experiences of the people it serves remain at the heart of its work.

If you would like to support Asylum Welcome's work with refugees, asylum seekers and vulnerable migrants across Oxfordshire, please visit: <https://www.asylum-welcome.org/donate>

# Why do people migrate?

## The reasons refugees leave everything in search of a new life

I AM a refugee. Fortunately, after spending a year living in a hotel, my asylum claim was accepted. For this, I am deeply grateful to God, and also to the people and Government of Britain — a nation that generously helped me when I needed somewhere safe to seek refuge.

Something happened to me recently that made me think more deeply about what migration really means. I went to see a member of my local council to ask for help finding a room to rent. She was originally from an Asian country and asked me: “Iran is a good country. Why do people come here?”

Her question shocked me. It took me a few moments to understand the depth of what she was asking. I thought to myself: “Does she not even follow the news?”

I tried to explain why many people in Iran leave: political repression and the killing of thousands of people during protests, the absence of freedom of expression, social restrictions, human rights violations and insecurity.

That short conversation became the inspiration for writing this series, which will continue in the next issue of Exodus asking the fundamental question: why do people migrate?

Migration has many different causes, and not all migrants have a single reason.

**War and insecurity:** When war begins and people's lives are at risk, they leave their homes and cities to save themselves and their families.

**Political repression and the absence of freedom of expression:** Pressure because of one's beliefs, writing, or social or political activities can force a person to leave their country.

For me, this is not simply theoretical. One of the charges brought against me was ‘propaganda against the

In the first part of an in-depth look at migration, Exodus reporter **Vahid Moghaddami Talemi** examines the reasons why people leave home to seek sanctuary elsewhere.

Picture: DFID - UK Department for International Development is licensed under CC BY-SA 2.0.



Refugees queue for water in the Jamam camp, South Sudan.

system’.

**Freedom of dress and the right to personal choice:** In some countries women and girls face compulsory laws and regulations concerning their clothing.

A woman may be reprimanded, harassed, arrested or punished simply because her clothing does not comply with government regulations; even showing part of her hair can lead to action against her.

In such circumstances, the issue is not simply about clothing. It is about a person's right to make decisions about their own body and private life. For a woman who does not want to live under compulsion and feels unsafe because of her choice of clothing, migration may be a way to find freedom and security. In some cases, the pressure and threats do not come only from the authorities. A person may also face threats or violence from family members or others because of their choice

of lifestyle or clothing.

**Threats to life and persecution:** Sometimes people are forced to leave their homes because of direct threats to their lives or safety.

**Ethnic discrimination and repression:** Discrimination against ethnic communities and groups can make life difficult and unsafe.

**Religious discrimination:** Some people face pressure and restrictions because of their religious beliefs or because they have changed their beliefs.

**Sexual orientation and gender identity:** Some face threats, discrimination or punishment because of their sexual orientation or gender identity, and migrate to protect their lives and freedom.

**The future of their children:** Parents sometimes leave their country so their children can grow up in a safer environment with better opportunities.

**Work and a better life:** Poverty, unemployment and a lack

of job opportunities can also be reasons for migration.

**Migration of professionals and the brain drain:** Scientists, doctors, engineers, university lecturers and other skilled professionals may leave their countries because suitable opportunities or conditions are unavailable.

**Capital flight:** like human talent, capital can move from one country to another, particularly when economic security and the future of investment are uncertain.

**Natural disasters and climate change:** Drought, water shortages, floods, wildfires and changes in the climate can force people to leave the places where they live. When there is no water, agriculture disappears and an area can no longer provide basic necessities, people may have no choice but to move elsewhere.

**Joining family members:** Sometimes the reason for migration is simpler - a person wants to live with their spouse, children, parents or other family members.

It's important to remember migration does not always mean crossing an international border.

During the Iran-Iraq War, many families living in war-affected areas left their homes and moved to other cities and provinces within Iran.

They did not take passports out of their pockets or cross an international border, but they lost their homes, workplaces, their children's schools and parts of the lives they had built.

Climate change can create similar circumstances. In such situations, migration is no longer simply an economic decision. Sometimes it is an attempt to continue living.

In the next Exodus I explore whether migration really is ‘a choice’.



Jean-Marc Hall, left, with some of the refugees and asylum seekers who have volunteered for the Karti Litter Pickers and members of the Maidenhead Litter Avengers and, inset, the bags of rubbish collected from just one street on their first outing.

## *Volunteers sign up to help keep their streets litter-free*

### Group from asylum hotel determined to 'give something back'

A GROUP of refugees and asylum seekers living in Maidenhead, Berkshire, have teamed up with a local environmental group, The 'Maidenhead Litter Avengers' to help keep the streets and parks of the town clear of rubbish.

The group calling themselves the Karti Litter Pickers, from the Somali word for competence, have been welcomed by Maidenhead Litter Avengers who are enthusiastic about the collaboration and the volunteers joining in to help out.

The Maidenhead branch of charity the St Vincent de Paul Society (SVP) has financed the project, donating the equip-

ment needed by the refugee team including litter-pickers, high-viz jackets and plastic hoops to keep rubbish bags open, making them easier to fill.

Volunteer Mohamud, a refugee from Somalia, is excited about the prospect of joining in and helping the community-led organisation of Maidenhead residents.

He said: "I want to help put back into the community and to thank the people of Maidenhead for the help and support I have received since I arrived here."

Jean-Marc Hall, from the SVP, said: "Clearing rubbish from our streets may not be the most glamorous of jobs, but the

volunteers agree the sense of satisfaction and community spirit helps them appreciate the importance of looking after the environment.

"Volunteer litter pickers can help make a huge difference to how rubbish affects our social and communal wellbeing and this is a fantastic way for the group – who are not allowed to work – to contribute to the community where they are building new lives."

He added: "With more and more rubbish-picking groups appearing in our communities, it highlights why we need to look after our local environment."

# *It's time to stop the killing*

## Growing international concern over number of executions in Iran

IN AUGUST the United Kingdom, the European Union and 32 other countries issued a joint statement condemning the continued execution of protesters and the Islamic Republic of Iran's use of the death penalty. They called for an immediate end to the death penalty and the release of people who have been arbitrarily detained.

This statement is only one sign of growing international concern over the human rights situation in Iran.

Execution in the Islamic Republic is no longer merely a judicial punishment. For many observers and human rights defenders, it has become a tool for creating fear, silencing protests and suppressing opponents. In recent months, the increase in death sentences and their implementation, particularly in connection with nationwide protests, has intensified international concern. Behind these statements are statistics that reveal the scale of the crisis.

According to Iran Human Rights, the number of recorded executions in 2026 had reached 524 by early September. This figure refers to cases documented and recorded by the organisation, and the actual number of executions may be higher.

Amnesty International has also repeatedly warned about the use of the death penalty to suppress opponents and create a climate of fear. When execution is accompanied by torture, forced confessions and unfair trials, it becomes a tool for creating fear throughout society.

Iran has become one of the world's leading users of the death penalty. According to Amnesty International, it executed at least 2,159 people in 2025 — the highest recorded number among countries for which reliable data was available.

Iran stands at the top of the global execution table and the death penalty has become an important instrument of the judicial and repressive system.

The widespread protests of January 2026 were accompanied by the arrest of large numbers of citizens. The main concern of human rights defenders is many of these cases fall far short of fair-trial standards. Reports have emerged of torture, forced confessions and defendants being denied effective access to independent legal representation.

In July United Nations experts warned about death sentences issued against 12

Picture: Gallows by fractalx is licensed under CC BY-SA 2.0.



young men in connection with the January protests and called for them to be overturned.

In Isfahan, in two separate cases connected to the protests, a total of 22 people have faced the death penalty. In the first case, 12 people were sentenced to death. By August 2026, four of them had been executed. Another suffered a stroke before his sentence could be carried out and was transferred to hospital. After returning to prison, however, he remained at risk of execution. Reports have also pointed to serious problems in the judicial process, including restrictions on lawyers' access to case files and defendants being denied an effective defence. Three of the defendants in this case were teenagers at the time of the protests.

In the second case, 16 people were tried and 10 sentenced to death. Six remain in prison. Most are young people under the age of 23. Among them are twin sisters.

On 28 July 2026, two young protesters were executed in public in Ali-Khani Square in Isfahan. The executions were carried out using a crane. When the gallows are brought from the prison to the city square, the aim is not only to take one person's life; it is to frighten thousands of people who witness the scene.

Reports published about the suppression of students also indicate that Iranian universities faced extensive security pressure in 2026.

The repression has not been limited to protesters and students. Reports show dozens of teachers and labour activists were arrested, prosecuted or imprisoned in 2026. In Tehran, legal cases were also brought against a number of nurses. One of the darkest chapters of 2026 goes back to the protests of Dey, which began on 27 December 2025. During the crackdown,

large numbers of protesters lost their lives. The two nights of 8 and 9 January, 2026 were the bloodiest period of the widespread killings. Amnesty International found the killings of protesters occurred primarily on these two days.

Amnesty, examining images and videos associated with the Kahrizak forensic medicine facility, identified hundreds of body bags. These represent only part of the scale of the killings. In the days following the killings, Ali Khamenei, then Supreme Leader of the Islamic Republic, spoke of 'several thousand' people being killed during the protests — the first explicit acknowledgement at the highest level of casualties numbering in the thousands.

The Islamic Republic itself announced an official figure of 3,117 people killed in January 2026. Subsequently, a list containing the names and national identification numbers of 2,985 victims was published.

The vast difference between the government's official figures, the list published by the government, human rights organisations' reports and much higher figures cited by foreign officials demonstrates the difficulty of fully documenting the victims of the crackdown.

When even the exact number of victims of a national massacre remains unclear because of communication blackouts and restrictions on information, that silence becomes part of the tragedy.

Future historians will ask how execution became part of the machinery of power, how a society experienced such an extensive level of state violence, and why the world failed to prevent its continuation?

International condemnation is important, but condemnation alone is not enough. The international community should provide political, diplomatic and practical support to Iranian civil society, human rights defenders, independent journalists and democratic forces.

Ultimately, the future of Iran and its political system must be determined by the Iranian people. But the international community faces a choice: it can limit itself to issuing statements and condemnations, or it can create more effective political and diplomatic pressure to prevent further executions and repression and support Iranian civil society and democratic forces.

By Parsa Irani

## Myth-busting figures from Government

THE Government has released the latest immigration statistics for the year ending June 2026.

Refugee support charity Care4Calais has looked at the numbers and come up with five things you probably won't read about in the mainstream media.

The two largest nationalities that crossed the Channel on a small boat in the last year were Eritreans and Sudanese nationals - and the Government granted protection to 84 per cent (Eritreans) and 92 per cent (Sudanese) of asylum claimants from those countries who received an initial decision in the last year. So much for: 'they're not real refugees'.

The number of claims awaiting an initial decision is at its lowest level since 2019 - but the number of cases awaiting an appeal decision has increased fourteen-fold in the last four years. The backlog hasn't disappeared, it's just shifted.

The Government's own data shows historically the grant rate increases by 20 per cent after appeals. That means tens of thousands of people's lives are in limbo due to the appeals backlog, when all they want is to start rebuilding their lives.

The number of people arriving via resettlement schemes is down 48 per cent, and the number of family reunions is down 38 per cent after the Government paused them last September. Just 448 people were able to come to the UK via the Resettlement and Mandate scheme showing why we need safe routes.

Almost one in three (29 per cent) of all asylum claims were made by women, and 18 per cent were by children.

Another myth dispelled by the facts.

The bottom line is these are the Government's figures. Remember them the next time the mainstream media or politicians spread misinformation about the numbers.

# Uplifting drama does not ignore reality

## Migration is also about finding a new home

*TOURIST Family*, a 2025 Indian Tamil-language film directed by Abishan Jeevinth, is a warm, uplifting family comedy-drama that combines humour with the realities of migration.

Jeevinth, tells the story of a Sri Lankan Tamil family who leave their country in search of a better future and a new beginning in India.

The father, mother and their two sons arrive in Tamil Nadu and try to build a new life in a neighbourhood of Chennai. They are not only confronted with economic difficulties and the challenges of migration, but also with the difficult task of finding their place in a new society, where the language, culture and attitudes of the people around them are different from what they have known.

Unlike many films about migration, however, *Tourist Family* does not portray migrants simply as victims, helpless people or strangers trapped by borders. Alongside the difficulties of migration, the film focuses on hope, family, compassion and the possibility of starting again. The relationship between the family and their new neighbours gradually becomes an important part of the story. People who initially see the newcomers as outsiders slowly discover that behind labels such as 'migrant' or 'refugee' are human beings with dreams, fears, talents and very ordinary hopes.

The film does not completely turn away from the difficult realities of migration. Fear of being discovered, uncertainty about legal status and suspicion towards migrants are all part of the story. But ultimately, its message is more about trust and humanity than fear and alienation. Perhaps the most appealing aspect of *Tourist Family* is that it does not present migration only as a crisis. Migration can also be



Picture: Million Dollar Studios

the beginning of a new chapter — an opportunity to build new relationships, make new friends and gradually become part of a society that once felt completely unfamiliar.

In a world where borders can sometimes separate people from one another, the film offers a simple reminder: to feel that we belong, perhaps the borders do not have to change; sometimes, the way we look at one another does.

*Tourist Family* is available on Amazon Prime.

## Fears raised over asylum process changes

ADVOCACY group Right to Remain has raised concerns that applicants may be disadvantaged by the introduction of 'merged registration' in the asylum interview process by the Home Office in August.

It means applicants from countries regarded as 'manifestly safe' now have a single interview combining registration and assessment of their claim, instead of separate screening and

substantive interviews. Because of the change — designed to speed up the process — the details and evidence provided by applicants at the very beginning carry significantly more weight.

Right to Remain fears some applicants may have fewer opportunities to present their cases or secure timely legal advice before a refusal or certification decision is made.

# *A tale of broken bottles and shattered dreams*

## Afghan refugees stuck in limbo in Pakistan live in constant fear

IN PAKISTAN, Afghan refugees face relentless fear — police sirens in the streets of Rawalpindi, unfamiliar voices echoing with authority.

We couldn't walk freely without that looming threat — an invisible chain that kept us always looking over our shoulder, sunk in thoughts of arrest and deportation back to Afghanistan.

Before we fled to Pakistan, life in Afghanistan held a freedom I didn't fully grasp — an ordinary freedom. I spoke my mother tongue freely, laughed with neighbours.

Everything changed when the Taliban took over in August 2021. My father, the core of our family, lost his job as a prosecutor. Life got very difficult. Security vanished for all of us. We watched as Afghan citizens crowded around Kabul Airport, desperate to leave, grasping at any chance for safety, fleeing a future that now felt impossible.

In fear of being captured by the Taliban, we hurriedly packed what little we could and fled to Pakistan.

When we reached Islamabad after a difficult and frightening journey, my father found a tiny room. Fear was now a permanent guest. No Security, no protection, no future — it felt like a prison darker than any

cell. One morning my father asked me to go out. I was the eldest son in our family and he trusted me to bring back breakfast.

As I stepped into the street I heard a police car — just a sound at first, but it dragged me back to scenes of police brutality at the border and the fear still in my chest.

I reached the shop, a tiny corner stand tucked between two tall buildings. The man behind the counter, with a small black hat and a curious look, took my coins.

I grasped the bottles of milk and set off. Then, the siren — sharp, sudden, and merciless — cut through the air. My breath caught, cold fear rushing through me.

I glanced behind me — and the police car was there, waiting, a steel shadow.

I saw a refugee not far away, his voice raw with desperation, pleading in Persian, his words breaking as he begged the officers to have a mercy on him. But they didn't care. Just like at the border, they were cold, unfeeling.

The bottles slipped from my hands, glass shattering like every fragile hope I had left.

My legs turned numb; my chest felt like it was caving in. The officers grabbed him, forced him into the car, and in that instant,

one tall officer glared straight at me.

I looked down at the broken sugar spilled across the pavement. I thought he was coming toward me. I sank to the wall, begging God to save me and fortunately the policeman turned and sat in the car.

Finally they drove off, I couldn't move — frozen for what felt like half an hour as I stared at the spilled milk and sugar.

Then, a thin boy, no older than 12, crossed the street.

He picked up the bottles, handed them to me, and whispered, "Uncle, can I help you?" And in that small, fragile gesture, he gave me a sliver of hope I thought I had lost forever.

My experience is not unique. Across Pakistan, thousands of Afghan refugees face constant threats of deportation, grappling with insecurity at every step.

Researchers such as Aysha Aktar Adhara say: "Afghan refugees in Pakistan live in constant fear, each step marked by the looming threat of deportation."

The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees reports that Afghan refugees in Pakistan face deprivation of education, being forced back to Afghanistan, and stripped of their right to work.

Human Rights Watch says since 2023, hundreds of thousands of Afghan refugees have been forced to return to Afghanistan, pushing already vulnerable families deeper into poverty, danger, and trauma.

Behind every statistic is a real story like mine — a boy who lost his dream, struggling just to buy a food without fearing that each step outside might be his last.

Volker Turk, the UN's High Commissioner for Human Rights, said: "Afghan women, children, and men continue to be pushed out of countries where they once sought safety, forcing them to return to Afghanistan against their will and exposing them to grave risk."

Afghan refugees are not asking for charity; they want dignity, justice, and security. Even in exile, even in silence, sometimes it only takes one voice to remind us that our future is not over yet.

Mehrullah Rahmani



Picture: Voice of America, Public domain, via Wikimedia Commons

Uncertainty and fear are the companions of Afghan refugees living in Pakistan.



# *The rise of the far-right*

## Blaming 'others' is easier than finding real solutions to problems

THE RISE of populism and the far right is demonstrated by the AfD's victories in German state elections and recent the funeral of Ratko Mladić, the Bosnian war criminal.

Europe is again facing a disturbing question: Is a continent that still carries the wounds of the Second World War, the Balkan wars and the Srebrenica genocide beginning to forget the lessons of its past?

While it lacks the seats to take overall control, the victory of the Alternative for Germany (AfD) in two state elections in September and October makes the question even more serious.

This is not simply an election result. It reflects deep dissatisfaction among parts of society with traditional political parties, economic difficulties, migration and feelings of insecurity. Solving a difficult problem is hard, creating an enemy is easier.

One of the familiar methods of populism and the far right is to turn complex social problems into a simple answer: 'They are to blame'.

Migrants, refugees, ethnic and religious minorities, or other vulnerable groups can be-

come the 'other' — blamed for economic problems, unemployment, the housing crisis, pressure on public services or insecurity. Instead of addressing the roots of these problems, public anger is directed towards a weaker group as a scapegoat.

This is not limited to one country or one region. Populism and the far right has different names, slogans and forms across the world, but they use a similar logic: creating a 'we' against a 'them', generating fear and anger, blaming migrants, minorities or other groups, and turning genuine social dissatisfaction into division and hostility.

Europe's history contains painful examples of the consequences of such politics. In Nazi Germany, Jews, Roma, political opponents and other groups were portrayed as enemies and blamed for the country's problems. Today's Europe and the wider world are not the same as Nazi Germany, and these periods should not simply be equated. But the historical lesson of turning a social group into an 'enemy' and using fear to mobilise political support must not be forgotten. In Iran, although

the political and historical context is different, the pattern of creating an 'other' can also be seen. Afghan migrants, as well as religious minorities have faced discrimination, pressure, detention and negative propaganda.

The subjects may be different but the principle is repeated: when political power cannot or does not want to address the roots of problems, creating an 'enemy' is easier than real solutions.

Another example of the danger of forgetting the past can be seen in the Balkans. On September 7, thousands attended the funeral of Ratko Mladić in Belgrade. The former Bosnian Serb commander had been convicted of genocide, war crimes and crimes against humanity for his role in the Srebrenica massacre, in which about 8,000 Bosnian Muslim men and boys were killed, as well as for the siege of Sarajevo. When a war criminal becomes a hero, the danger is not only about the past; the future is also at risk. In Britain, we have seen another example of rising anti-immigration tensions. In September, black-clad

anti-immigration protesters, some with covered faces blocked roads leading to the Port of Dover and disrupted traffic. The slogan 'Stop the Boats' was central to the protest. The behaviour and disruption were condemned by the UK government. It stressed peaceful protest is an important part of democracy, but intimidating behaviour and disruption cannot be accepted.

In a world where war, repression and crisis have forced millions to leave their homes, refugees from Iran, Afghanistan, Sudan, Ukraine, Gaza and other areas affected by conflict are, above all, victims of these circumstances — not their cause.

Populism presents itself as the voice of ordinary people. Some of the concerns people have are real. But the answer is not hatred of minorities. Society needs more housing, stronger public services, a fairer economy, better education and effective security policies — not the creation of enemies.

Why does a society suffering genuine problems choose easy promises and scapegoats over real but harder solutions?

**Vahid Moghaddami Talemi**



People forced to live in the terrible conditions of makeshift migrant camps in Europe are easy prey for criminal gangs.

## *When human beings are reduced to commodities*

### Vulnerable migrants risk exploitation from the people smugglers

MIGRATION is not always a free choice.

For many people, fleeing war, repression, insecurity or poverty means embarking on an unknown journey — one that can sometimes become another stage of fear, violence and exploitation.

When safe and legal routes are limited, migrants may have little choice but to trust smugglers who promise to take them across borders. But that trust can sometimes become the beginning of a new form of captivity, involving debt, threats, deception, theft or coercion.

In the forests of northern France, along the routes around Dunkirk and Calais, I personally witnessed cases in which some smugglers took migrants' money and then refused to return it, leaving them with nothing. Some migrants were left without even enough money to buy food.

Where powerful and, in some cases, armed smuggling groups were involved, migrants without valid documents and without knowledge of the language or legal system could feel almost completely unable to defend themselves.

But the problem was not only financial. I also witnessed men and young men being beaten and saw an atmosphere of fear and domination.

Another deeply disturbing issue has emerged along the Turkey-Greece border.

This year, a BBC investigation reported allegations some migrants had been used as 'mercenaries' to help push other mi-

grants back from Greece into Turkey, with accounts involving armed and masked men, violence and theft.

Greek authorities denied the allegations. As a journalist, I have also spoken with migrants who described encounters with armed and masked individuals, threats, beatings, theft of personal belongings and forced returns.

Their accounts raise deeply troubling questions about what can happen to vulnerable people at Europe's borders.

For a migrant fleeing danger, discovering another form of violence at the border can turn the journey to safety into a new nightmare. The distinction between migrant smuggling and human trafficking is important. They are not legally the same.

But when threats, coercion, deception or the exploitation of a person's vulnerability enter the picture, the situation can become one of human trafficking and exploitation.

Social media has also become part of this reality. Migrants use online platforms to find routes and exchange experiences, while smugglers and criminal networks can use the same spaces to advertise routes, attract customers and exploit vulnerable people.

UK law enforcement agencies have warned that criminals can use online advertisements and social media to recruit victims. Women and children — particularly unaccompanied children — are among the

most vulnerable. But men and young people can also become victims of violence, forced labour, debt and other forms of exploitation.

Slavery did not disappear with the abolition of historical slavery.

The chains have simply changed form. Sometimes they are debt; sometimes threats, fear, lack of documents or complete dependence on someone who controls a person's journey or work.

The efforts of countries that confront this problem through law and public institutions deserve recognition.

In the UK, the Modern Slavery Act 2015 was an important step in legally addressing modern slavery and human trafficking. Alongside it, mechanisms such as the National Referral Mechanism (NRM) have been established to identify potential victims and provide support.

Last year, 23,411 potential victims of modern slavery were referred to the NRM in the UK — the highest annual figure since the mechanism began.

Britain and other European countries still face serious challenges, but recognising modern slavery and building legal and support mechanisms to combat it are important steps. These efforts deserve to be strengthened.

Before a migrant is a 'migrant', they are a human being — with the right to life, safety, dignity and freedom.

Vahid Moghaddami Talami

## Laptops let journalists in Gaza keep on reporting



FREELANCE journalists in Gaza now have access to the latest technology to write, edit and file their stories thanks to a new partnership between the Rory Peck Trust and the Palestinian Journalists Protection Centre, (PJPC) providing laptops to the Gaza Journalists Hub.

Ashraf Mashharawi, Director of the Palestinian Journalists Protection Center, said the organisation's goal is to help journalists continue their work by every means possible:

"Every journalist we are able to help keep working — even by providing some of the basic tools they need — is another opportunity to keep the story alive."

Announcing the partnership, Rory Peck Trust executive director Jon Williams said its impact would be felt far beyond Gaza: "For two-and-a-half years, these journalists — many of these freelancers — have been the world's eyes and ears inside Gaza, documenting the unfolding horror on their doorstep even as they themselves have been fighting for survival. The least they deserve is to have the tools to do the job. Now, many more of them will — ensuring they can continue to bear witness to what is happening inside Gaza."

If you would like to donate to this work please email: [fundraising@rorypecktrust.org](mailto:fundraising@rorypecktrust.org)

# *'Music has always been political, Ed'*

## Sheeran's fence-sitting denies history of protest

Credit: Kris Krug, Vancouver, CC BY-SA 2.0 via Wikimedia Commons



Picture: Paul Hudson UK, CC BY 2.0 via Wikimedia Commons



**Musicians like Billy Bragg and Kneecap maintain the long tradition of protest through song.**

MUSIC evokes all types of emotions, acting as a universal outlet for complex human feelings that can prove a great source of inspiration and awareness.

The use of music and poetry to inform the listener and reframe political facts has existed for centuries.

For generations, Folk, Jazz and Rock have explicitly tackled the questions of war, civil rights and segregation, helping to reshape politics.

Recently, Ed Sheeran's attempt to distance himself from political realities has proved that it is no longer an option for superstars, and is a reminder that music and politics have an inseparable lifelong history, with a built in political pulse.

Musician and poet Woody Guthrie paved the way politically, with one of the most famous American folk songs, 'This Land is Your Land', exemplifying socialistic patriotism.

The Clash's recording of 'Straight to Hell' is one of the most potent and haunting songs that weaves together four separated narratives of human displacement, social abandonment and economic cruelty.

Billy Bragg maintains his intrepid and un-

daunted journey through the use of music and the spoken word to illustrate how influential contemporary music is in today's society.

For over four decades he has been a defining voice in British music.

From blending the raw energy of punk rock into the traditions of folk music and protest songs, he has maintained a campaign to engage in grassroots activism and workers' rights, as well as being involved in humanitarian causes.

Today, bands like Irish rockers Fontaines DC and Kneecap broadcast their political identities fearlessly. Meanwhile, the American rapper Kendrick Lamar's music features political criticism and social conflict, making him one of the most acclaimed artists of his generation.

And at the (arguably) largest stage in the world of music festivals, the Coachella Music Festival, American band the Strokes sent out a political message that culminated with video footage of conflicts in Gaza and Iran, finishing with a strongly worded rhetorical question; "WHAT SIDE ARE YOU STANDING ON?"

A question that Ed Sheeran should have deferred to his moral judgment.

**Jean-Marc Hall**

**'It is a reminder that music and politics have an inseparable lifelong history with a built-in political pulse.'**

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