

Nailing press myths about refugees

Introduction

A MORI poll carried out in May this year asked respondents what word the media most uses when referring to asylum seekers and refugees. The top answer, mentioned by 64%, was 'illegal immigrant'. 'Bogus' was cited by 22% of respondents.

This comes as no surprise when you take even a cursory look at the British press, which is liberally peppered with the use of negative language and misinformation around the issue of asylum in the UK. Indeed, the same poll showed that respondents generally felt the media is negative on the issue.

Here are a few of the most pervasive myths which appear in British newspapers, against a few facts which put the record straight.

The Claim

- "a tide of humanity that sees Britain as the land of milk and honey", *The Sun*, 22 May 2002

The Facts

- Is Britain really the land of milk and honey for asylum seekers? In fact, no. Asylum seekers are not allowed to claim mainstream welfare benefits. If they are destitute, the only option for some is to apply for support with the National Asylum Support Service (NASS), the Government department responsible for supporting destitute asylum applicants. NASS support is very basic indeed. A single adult has to survive on £37.77 a week – 30% below the poverty line. It is irrational to suggest that asylum seekers embark on arduous and often dangerous journeys to the UK for that amount of money.
- From 8th January the Government will withhold support from the majority of people who apply for asylum once inside the UK, rather than at a port. According to housing and welfare experts, this is likely to lead to chronic destitution and homelessness. There is no sound factual basis for discriminating against those who claim asylum once they are in the UK - in fact the Home Office's own figures show that around 65 per cent of positive decisions are given to in-country applicants.
- A joint study by Oxfam and the Refugee Council shows that the asylum system, far from making the UK 'a land of milk and honey' for asylum seekers, institutionalises poverty. A report was produced on the basis of studying 40 organisations working with asylum seekers and refugees, which revealed that of those with whom they have contact, 85% experience hunger, 95% cannot afford to buy clothes or shoes and 80% are not able to maintain good health. The report reveals that many asylum seekers do not receive the basic support they may be entitled to, because the system is badly designed, extremely bureaucratic and poorly run.

The Claim

- "Asylum seekers: 9 out of 10 are conmen" – *Daily Star, 22 May 2002*

The Facts

- In fact, statistics published by the Home Office figures (2nd quarter, 2002) show that well over 50 per cent of asylum seekers are given permission to stay in this country: 43 per cent of initial decisions that have been properly assessed resulted in applicants being given the right to remain in this country for their protection and around one in four appeals are successful. The fact that so many asylum seekers who are initially refused go on to win their appeals reflects the poor quality of decision making at the Home Office.
- Such statements fail to recognise the connection between the situation in countries of origin and the people who seek refuge in the UK. You only need look at the latest top four nationalities - Iraq, Zimbabwe, Afghanistan and Somalia - of those seeking asylum to see that this increase in positive decisions proves that the majority of asylum seekers are fleeing for their lives from harsh and oppressive regimes and severe ethnic conflict. It is unfortunate that the same government which is planning a possible war against Iraq, citing its oppressive political regime as good cause, at the same time fails to recognise the reasons why people flee such regimes.

The Claim

"...illegal asylum seekers" - *Evening Standard, 24 September 2002*

The Facts

- By definition, there is no such thing as an 'illegal asylum seeker'. The UK has signed the 1951 Convention on Refugees, which means that by law, anyone has the right to apply for asylum in the UK and remain until a final decision on their asylum application has been made. The Refugee Council has taken the issue of this particular quote to the Press Complaints Commission for this reason.
- In January 2002, the Advertising Standards Authority upheld a complaint against a polling company, which sent out a fax referring to asylum seekers as 'illegals', as racist, offensive and misleading.
- The fact that an asylum seeker may have entered the country illegally does not mean their case lacks credibility. It is virtually impossible for people fleeing persecution to reach Britain without resorting to the use of false documents. In recognition of this fact, Article 31 of the 1951 Convention on Refugees prohibits governments from penalising refugees who use false documents.

The Claim

"Losing the war on asylum crime" – *Daily Mail, 26 November 2002*

The Facts

- One of many alarmist headlines implying that all asylum seekers are criminals. A report published by the Association of Chief Police Officers (ACPO) recently confirmed that there is no evidence for a higher rate of criminality among refugees and asylum seekers. In fact, according to ACPO, having fled danger in their home country, asylum seekers are more likely to become victims of crime in the UK. There have been countless attacks on asylum seekers around Britain, including the murder of an asylum seeker in Glasgow in 2001 and in Sunderland earlier this year. The murder in Glasgow prompted the UN High Commissioner for Refugees to condemn the British media for provoking racial hatred.

The Claim

- "Bogus asylum seekers are draining millions from the NHS" – *Daily Express, 26 November 2002*

The Facts

- This statement is completely unsubstantiated. What is more, asylum seekers are entitled to NHS services, like other residents and visitors to the UK.
- This idea ignores the enormous contribution that asylum seekers, refugees and other immigrants make to the economic and cultural life of the UK. Refugees bring with them a wealth of skills and experience – even the Home Office has recognised this and made a commitment, through its Integration Unit, to put such skills to good use. The NHS relies heavily on foreign labour – according to the Greater London Authority, 23% of doctors and 47% of nurses working within the NHS were born outside the UK.
- According to a recent Home Office study carried out last year, migrants, including asylum seekers and refugees - are far from being a burden on UK tax payers. On the contrary, in 1999-2000, they made a net fiscal contribution of approximately £2.5 billion, worth 1p on income tax.
- Research carried out by Personnel Today in November 2001, found that 9 out of 10 employers want to take on refugees to meet skills' shortages, but do not due to ignorance of the law and confusing Home Office paperwork.
- Despite such evidence and that of the contributions, real and potential, the Government has recently reversed legislation so that asylum seekers are now prevented from working. Home Office research has shown that asylum seekers would by far prefer to support themselves than be supported by the Government, yet the law prevents them from doing so. Sadly, it is asylum seekers who are demonised for 'draining' the state, when, despite commitments on refugee integration, they are discouraged from being independent.

The Claim

"Britain the No.1 refugee magnet" - *The Sun, 14 September 2002*

The Facts

- No. 1? Even within the EU, the UK ranked 10th in terms of asylum applications in relation to the overall population in 2001. The truth about refugee movements is the world's poorest countries both produce and bear responsibility for most refugees. During 1992-2001, 86 per cent of the world's estimated 12 million refugees originated from developing countries, whilst such countries provided asylum to 72 per cent of the global population. If you consider global refugee and asylum seeking populations in relation to the host country's size, population and wealth, the UK ranks 32nd. Taking the greatest burden are Iran, Burundi and Guinea.
- A recent MORI poll demonstrates the impact of such misinformation, showing that people vastly overestimate the numbers of asylum seekers and refugees in the UK – on average people think that 23% of the world's refugees and asylum seekers are in the UK, more than 10 times greater than the reality, which is actually less than 2%.
- The idea that Britain or indeed any other European country is a 'soft touch' is simply not true. As European countries from Denmark and Holland to Switzerland introduce increasingly tougher immigration controls, it is extremely difficult to gain entry to Europe at all. If we compare the numbers of asylum seekers granted protection in the UK with those in Canada, the UK emerges as far from being a 'soft touch'. In 2001, Canada granted protection to 97% of Afghan asylum applicants, where the UK granted only 19%. Somali applicants had a 92% success rate in Canada, where in the UK it was only 34%. 85% of Colombian applicants in Canada were granted protection, against a mere 3% in the UK.

The Claim:

“Asylum rejects’ scandal: 90 per cent stay anyway” *Daily Star*, 16 September 2002

The Facts

- Asylum seekers are not cheats because they have been unsuccessful with their asylum application – after all, they have exercised a fundamental human right. The asylum process is not easy: the criteria set out in the 1951 Convention on Refugees, against which asylum claims are examined, are very strict. At the same time, Home Office decisions are often based on inaccuracies, failures to probe certain issues, and an overemphasis on trying to discredit the applicant during the asylum interview. The Home Office’s poor standards of decision-making have been well-documented by Asylum Aid <http://www.asylumaid.org.uk/AA%20pages/appeals.htm>.
- A large number of asylum seekers have their applications refused on purely procedural grounds. Many are unable to complete the Statement of Evidence Form, in which they have to outline, in English, their reasons for seeking asylum, within the required ten-day deadline. 21,220 applications were refused on non-compliance grounds in 2001, representing a fifth of total refusals; such refusals have nothing to do with the substance or credibility of a claim.
- There are clear reasons why the Home Office may not be able to remove someone. Whilst the person may be fully compliant with the system, they may be ill, pregnant or indeed the country of origin may not accept them back without documentation. The Refugee Council has set out principles for removals, which you can find on our website at www.refugeecouncil.org.uk

If you would like to get involved in our campaigning work, please e-mail us at:
protectrefugees@refugeecouncil.org.uk.

If you would like further information, please contact info@refugeecouncil.org.uk or tel 020 7820 3085.

Note on statistics: UK statistics are sourced from the Home Office, www.homeoffice.gov.uk. Global asylum and refugee statistics are sourced from the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), www.unhcr.ch.