



JRS Europe

Serving Forgotten Refugees

Jesuit Refugee Service www.jrseurope.org

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Refugee children, Kakuma Camp, Kenya

New Swiss asylum laws a worrying precedent

Voting on alterations of the asylum system in Switzerland have come out in favour of greatly increased restrictions. On 24th September 67.8% of voters backed the new legislation, accepting the arguments by the right-wing Justice Minister Christoph Blocher that changes were needed to fight alleged abuse of the system.

The legislation had come under harsh criticism from UNHCR and other NGOs and church groups in Switzerland, who managed to force a national vote even though both laws had already been passed by the parliament and the government.

One of the main points of concern is that asylum seekers must produce valid identity papers within 48 hours. According to UNHCR this could lead to breaches of the 1951 Refugee Convention; many genuine refugees cannot get identity papers before they flee, or their papers may be stolen or destroyed by those they have been smuggled by. The legislation also means that that asylum seekers face cuts to social welfare payments, and that those facing removal can be detained for up to 18 months.

Speaking to the national Swiss newspaper *Tages Anzeiger* on 25th September, Cornelia Bührle of JRS Europe expressed great concern: "One worries about the signal which could come from yesterday's referendum. Since the European Union aims at a common asylum procedure/law in order to prevent 'asylum shopping', the tightening of the asylum law in Switzerland threatens to become a model for those forces in Europe, who also would like to adopt a more restrictive line."

The Swiss Refugee Council have called the measures "unacceptable". Lukas Niederberger SJ, contact person for JRS in Switzerland, said in a short article written for JRS Germany before the vote: "A particularly poor trait is that new restrictions insinuate that refugees have in general a criminal attitude if they cannot provide valid identity documents issued by a public authority ... Those who want to combat 'abuse' effectively should take other measures."

The vote comes soon after UNHCR released statistics showing that the number of asylum applications to the EU have dropped by 14%; last year had had the fewest applications since 1987.

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For information on JRS' Detention Campaign see www.detention-in-europe.org

Pedro Arrupe Award 2006 - 2007 launched

JRS Europe has launched its second edition of the highly popular Pedro Arrupe Award. This is a project on refugees organised through the Jesuit schools and other schools linked to JRS. It aims to promote understanding and tolerance of the refugee issue amongst children and young adults by encouraging them to research and design a project about an area that most interests them.



Painting from 2004 - 05 award

Two winning groups from at least 28 schools will have the chance to visit JRS projects in Europe. See <http://www.jrseurope.org/pedroarrupe-award> for all the details!

Jesuits focus attention on Africa

On 6-8 September a conference by the Scribani Network entitled 'Africa and Europe, Cooperation in a Globalised World' took place in Munich. Key speakers included Clare Short MP (UK), Mark Rostaert SJ, President of the Jesuit Conference of European Provincials, and Fratern Masawe, Moderator of Jesuit Superiors of Africa and Madagascar (JESAM).

The conference aimed in particular to challenge the preconceived image of Africa as a continent with violent and unstable politics and economics, which can only be helped through short-term emergency aid. The integration of Africa into the world economy, the political strategies and social effects of African-European migration, and the problems facing women and their role in the development processes were examined from an African point of view with a specifically non euro-centred approach.

Michael Schöpf, JRS Europe, who led a workshop on Migration and Development, said that the

conference had been an excellent opportunity for further developing links between European-African Jesuit links.

A number of key courses of action were decided as a result of the conference, including strengthening the dialogue between Jesuits in Africa and Europe, strengthening education for Africa, and analysing the economic mechanisms involved.

(Written with thanks to Michael Reder, Institut für Gesellschaftspolitik).

Scribani is a network made up of members of European Jesuit research and action centres.



Fr. Elias Omondi Opongo S.J., Secretary of JESAM

(photo: Jacques Haers SJ)

Administrative detainees the most vulnerable prisoners in Europe

Out of all the Foreign prisoners detained in Europe, those in administrative detention are the most vulnerable. This is one of the conclusions drawn from a project executed by Professor Anton van Kalmthout and Femke Hofstee-van der Meulen from Tilburg University, along with JRS Europe, Foreign Liaison Office of the Dutch Probation Service and a number of other partners and national experts.

The project released its results at a meeting at the European Parliament on September 13th, at which around 55 people attended. The objective of the project was to address the social exclusion of prisoners detained in the EU outside their country of origin.

“Despite not having committed crimes, those in

administrative detention are often detained in circumstances worse than they would be in prison”, said Professor Van Kalmthout.

Detainees face overcrowding, insufficient legal aid and medical care. The language barriers can create fear, exclusion - from educational and rehabilitation programmes, prison life, contact with prison staff – and lack of understanding with regards to legal and administrative rights.

The meeting was hosted by Jules Maaten MEP, Chairman of the working group *Prisoners Abroad*, who talked about the common EU values and the importance of challenging social exclusion when there are over 100,000 foreign prisoners in the EU today.



New JRS Portugal website

JRS Portugal have announced a brand new website with a fresh design and full details of projects in the country, including its free medical consultations for asylum seekers (left). Visit www.jrsportugal.pt for all the details.

"It was as if I had been looking through a keyhole for many years"

Impressions from Kakuma Refugee camp, Kenya

"Coming to Kakuma was like stepping into a documentary. Before I got to Kakuma I thought that a refugee camp was a place with white tents only and people in starvation. What I found in Kakuma was a civilized community, hundreds of communities. Within the different nationalities there were several tribes. In the Somali community you could find restaurants, kiosks, workshops and even taxi drivers

The visit to Kakuma was one of the greatest moments in my life, and it is without doubt my biggest experience as a journalist. Seeing how the refugees live and talking to them was as if I had been looking through a keyhole in a door for many years, and then suddenly the door was flung open. I thank JRS for giving me this opportunity, especially the staff in Kakuma who spend a lot of time taking care of me and showing me around."

Kasper Tveden Jensen visited Kakuma after winning a competition for student journalists, which aimed to raise awareness of refugee realities in the European media.



Children at a JRS youth programme for disabled people
(photo: Kasper Tveden Jensen)

JRS Italy assisting detention inspection Commission

Centro Astalli (JRS Italy) is currently taking part in a series of visits to Detention Centres (CPTs or Centri di Permanenza Temporanea) in Italy. This is a process of inspection and revision of the existing detention system organised by The Interior Ministry. The establishment of the Commission comes after strong pressure from members of parliament and NGOs.



Fr Giovanni La Manna,
JRS Italy

The main objectives of the Commission are to evaluate the existing Centres, looking at the structure, the conditions, the detention, the staff, access to services, and collecting information which can be used in a wider process of revision

of the migration and detention systems in Italy.

The delegation has scheduled numerous visits to Lampedusa, off the coast of Sicily, as well as other centres including Rome, Torino and Crotona. Lampedusa has long been an object of concern; a

delegation of MEPs visited in July 2005 and issued a report expressing their shock about conditions there. Previously Human Rights Watch, who have recently issued a report on abuses against migrants, asylum seekers and refugees having conducted interviews in Italy and Libya, was refused access to Lampedusa by the Italian Government. UNHCR had also been refused access in March 2005.

Centro Astalli, represented by Giovanni La Manna SJ, JRS Italy Country Director, is part of a selection of competent NGOs invited. JRS Italy has a regular presence in the CPT at Ponte Galeria, Rome. It is hoped that the inclusion of civil society (in this case NGOs and journalists) will bring greater transparency to the system.

Other NGOs, including Consiglio Italiano per i Rifugiati (CIR), Medici Senza Frontiere (MSF) and Caritas Italiana, have already begun to successfully collaborate on the subject of asylum, presenting a common proposal for an organic law on asylum to the Italian Government on World Refugee Day 2006. www.centroastalli.it/doc/TavoloAsilo.doc
<http://hrw.org/reports/2006/libya0906/>

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Waiting to check out - 'Aged-out minors' in Dublin

The following is an abridged version of the runner-up article for the Competition for Student Journalists, organised by JRS Europe. The author is H el ene Hofman from Ireland.

When Simret arrived in Dublin in June 2003 it was raining. After a long journey, which had taken her from her mother's house in Eritrea to Sudan, where she paid a trafficker to take her to "a safe, Christian country", and now to the steps of the Irish Department of Justice, she was both tired and emotional. "I thought I was going to London or America," she says. "I had never even heard of Ireland. And I didn't know anything about asylum seekers. What's an asylum seeker? I didn't know."

The trafficker promised that he would stay with her until she had settled. He took her to the Department of Justice to apply for asylum and told her to wait outside while he went to get a bag for her. Simret waited for over an hour before she realised that he wasn't coming back. "I was crying. I knew nothing but to wait for him there. That day is very difficult for me. I will never forget that day."

As she was only 17 she was taken to a hostel for separated children seeking asylum. "The first night in that hostel I just locked the door. I didn't go outside for nearly 24 hours. I was really suffering and depressed." Three weeks later she started school.

Simret is now 20 years old. She has moved hostel twice since her arrival and has been living in the Viking Lodge for over a year. She was interviewed twice by authorities and refused refugee status on both occasions. Her only hope now is to get humanitarian leave to remain and she may have to wait up to three years for her request to be processed. She doesn't know how she can wait that long without papers, and more importantly, without a work permit. In the meantime she is studying for her Leaving Certificate examinations in June. She says she finds it difficult to concentrate. "I am all the time thinking," she explains. "Maybe they will send me a deportation notice tomorrow. I don't know what's going to happen in future. And I'm thinking about the hostel. You never get enough of anything here."

Situated in the Liberties, the oldest part of Dublin, the Viking Lodge still looks like a commercial hotel. Painted panels in the reception advertise the Guinness Brewery tour. But now the bar is empty and tables and chairs are lined up for mealtimes in what was once the hotel's function room. There are two, three or four people per room and nowhere for the young occupants to study. With a weekly payment of just €19.10, they rely entirely on the hostel for food. "It's very hard to stay in the hostel," says Simret. "You can't find what you need, like food. This evening I came home from school, I didn't eat

anything in school because I don't have enough money. With €19.10 I will buy shampoo, I will buy cream. Even toilet cleaner – I will buy it myself. They don't give us that even – imagine." ...

Since its inception last June, PLUS [Please Let Us Stay] has been working to get leave to remain for the group. It has also fought the cases of four or five of its members on an individual basis. When Carlos, a young Angolan, found himself in jail waiting to be deported, PLUS paid for a private lawyer to take on his case. He spent 10 days behind bars sharing a cell with criminals, before being

I thought I was going to London or America. What's an asylum seeker? I didn't know.

released and given a new interview and a fresh chance at getting refugee status.

Like most of the aged-out minors, Carlos arrived in Dublin in 2002. ... He was 16 when he fled his home. After the death of his father he was recruited by the Front for the Liberation of the Enclave of Cabinda (FLEC), a rebel group fighting for independence from Angola. He was 13 at the time and trained with the FLEC until the day Angolan troops stormed one of their underground meetings. "They were shooting and beating people. Some could escape, and the others . . . well, I guess they died." Carlos ran for his life and made it to the Democratic Republic Congo. From there he was taken to Ireland. By whom, he is hesitant to say. ...

He has been living in the Viking Lodge for almost two years. "You feel like you can give something to yourself and to the country," Carlos says. "And it's difficult because they don't give you a work permit to go out and make your own money so that you don't depend on their payment – which is nothing. You can't buy anything with that. You can't be living with that," he says. "People ask me, 'how can you survive in Dublin?' and sometimes you're like 'oh, let me go out tonight' or 'let me go shop tonight' and you just can't do that." For many of the aged-out minors, the prospect of several years waiting in the hostel without a work permit is a distressing one. "Some people, they finish their Leaving Cert then just sit around for two years. If that happens to me I will lose my mind," Simret says. "People want to work. I want to work." College for the aged-out minors is an expensive dream, and a job, their only chance at a better future. "But I have big hopes," says Simret. "I hope that things will change, but until its changes, life is sometimes so difficult for us."