



Aygun

FROM TURKEY

On Aygun's bedroom wall there is a drawing of a Muslim prophet. Underneath, scrawled in Turkish, are the words: "Don't carry hatred in your heart."

As a member of Turkey's Kurdish minority, the 34-year-old mother of two knows the consequences of hatred all too well. "My husband's cousin was killed by the authorities because they thought he was one of the Kurdish guerrillas," says Aygun.

"Because of this they suspected my husband as well. He was beaten and tortured. They drove us out of our village. They interrogated us, sometimes all through the night, called us 'dirty Kurds' and said: 'We'll burn you all.'

"My husband escaped to the UK. Then one day they beat me in front of my children. That was when I knew I had to get out. When we made it to the UK I felt like a new-born person because we were safe. I was so happy."

Yet today, as she waits for a decision from the Home Office, Aygun is once again living in fear. "Children on the estate are throwing stones at us, smashing our windows and calling us names. They are making racist attacks on us. One of our neighbours threw a lit cigarette at my child. I am afraid to go out and I keep my children locked inside the house.

"I want to be allowed to work and contribute to the community. People shouldn't be racist. Then I could let my children go outside and play with theirs."

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REFUGEE VOICES



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Selima

FROM SOMALIA TO SOUTHAMPTON

Selima works in Southampton as a bilingual assistant helping Somali schoolchildren. The 27-year-old says she loves her job, but it is tinged with sadness.

"Whenever I see another mum bringing her children to school, I smile," says Selima. "But I am empty inside because I have lost my own children."

Selima's family belonged to a minority ethnic group which was being persecuted by a dominant tribe in Somalia's civil war. It is a conflict in which rape is routinely used as a form of terror.

"My father was taken away and murdered. I watched my auntie being raped in our home. My husband fled and he is now living in Ethiopia. I have two very young children. I lived in fear of being raped. My mum told me I had to escape because I was a young woman. She said it was better for her to die than for me."

One day in 1999, fierce fighting broke out in Selima's town and her people scattered.

"Everyone panicked and I was separated from my family. I fled to Kenya, where I spent three days in the bush with no water and nothing to eat. But the Kenyans were returning people to Somalia, so I went to Ethiopia, where I stayed with my uncle. He found the money to get me to the UK."

Selima lived in London for two years. It was a difficult time.



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“When I arrived here, it was like being dropped in the ocean. I couldn’t bear to live without my children. I got very depressed and tried to kill myself.”

Selima found support from a network of Somali friends in London, who later moved to Southampton. Refugee Action persuaded the Home Office to allow Selima to be re-housed near them. Selima learned fast at college and soon developed excellent English. She began volunteering as an interpreter with Refugee Action in Southampton. It was through this work that she found her present job. Soon after, Selima was told that she would be granted refugee status.

Selima recently managed to contact her mother through a family tracing service and learned that her children, now aged six and three, are safe and well.

“I have found out where my family are and one day I hope they can come here. My dream is that one day soon I will be reunited with my children.”

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Sheka

FROM SIERRA LEONE TO OLDHAM, AND BACK AGAIN

Former journalist Sheka's life has been nothing short of a rollercoaster ride. After fleeing persecution in Sierra Leone, he lived as an asylum seeker for four years in the UK before his country's new president appointed him as press secretary at the end of 2007.

Sheka was brought up as a Christian in a small town in Sierra Leone. His father was a pastor. He had always wanted to be a journalist and in 1995 he graduated from the University of Sierra Leone in the capital Freetown with a degree in English language and literature.

He went on to work for the Concord Times Newspaper, a renowned national newspaper where he wrote a column called 'The Black Tank', commenting upon current political issues.

At that time Sierra Leone had a military government, the National Provisional Ruling Council, but rebel attacks were frequent. After writing an article about the murder of Nigerian activists (including the writer Ken Saro-Wiwa) he was told to rein in his views and he subsequently resigned.

In 1996 a new civilian government came to power, but the rebel war continued and with it the rape and pillage that consumed the country. Sheka's partner and child fled to England for safety (his partner had been born there) but Sheka stayed in Sierra Leone and started his own newspaper called Torchlight. Again the government were on his back and when he wrote an article about government corruption he was sentenced to four weeks in prison for contempt.

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He spent the first week in solitary confinement until international pressure forced the authorities to release him. On his release he continued to write but was soon in trouble with the authorities again.

After his uncle was murdered, Sheka spent a year hiding out near his mother's house. He would sleep in the bush in the day, only returning to his parents' house at night when he would write. After a year of this, he felt it was safe to return to the capital because by this time the UN peacekeepers were in place. He worked for the Centre of Media Education and Technology, training other journalists.

Soon afterwards, Sheka came to the UK for a conference on international media. He decided to search for his lost partner and child, who he tracked down to London. He had a six-month visa.

While here he was asked to write an article for the All Africa.Com website in which he criticised the Sierra Leone government. He heard from his brother that he was yet again wanted by the authorities as they had read his criticism of them. He was warned not to return home.

He claimed asylum and was dispersed to Oldham where he regularly attended church and did voluntary advice work, helping other asylum seekers. He was refused asylum but lodged a fresh claim and lived for many months on £35 a week in vouchers.

However, in 2007 Sheka's life was transformed. There was an election in his country and the opposition party won. This meant Sheka could return home safely. He was then offered the position of State House press secretary and has worked alongside the president since December 2007.

Before he left the UK, Sheka said:

"This changes everything for me. I have been a supporter of the opposition and a friend of the new President. This means I can now go back to Sierra Leone. It has been really tough for me in the UK, but I don't bear a grudge. I love this country. Thank God, I was never deported even though the government threatened me and told me to leave. I would have been killed if I had been returned. My faith in God got me through it."

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Jennifer

FROM SUDAN TO LEEDS

When Jennifer arrived in the UK in 1998, seeking asylum was the last thing on her mind. The 27-year-old from Sudan had won a scholarship for an MA in Development Studies at Leeds University. Jennifer had been forced to flee to Cairo from South Sudan in 1989. She worked with the church in Egypt before taking a degree in Kenya, where she later worked for British aid agencies.

“It was not safe for me in Sudan because my father was a bishop in the Anglican church,” she says. “The Islamic government was prohibiting worship and burning churches. My brothers were arrested and we were accused of links with the rebel movement. I knew I could never go back.”

After she had completed her MA, Jennifer planned to resume her career in Kenya. But the Kenyan authorities refused to renew her visa. “The Home Office were going to deport me to Khartoum, the Sudanese capital. I was terrified. I knew I would probably be killed. My only option was to apply for asylum.”

During this time, Jennifer became pregnant. Her savings ran out and she could no longer pay the rent in her student house.

“I was eight months pregnant when I was put in a hostel for newly-arrived asylum seekers. I cried – I felt the world was caving in on me. There is a stigma and I felt so ashamed I didn’t even tell my friends.

“Seven weeks later I was given temporary leave to remain in the UK. Just one week before I gave birth I found a council flat. It was on the eighth floor of a tower block

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and the lift was broken. I had a Caesarean and it was very painful to climb eight floors carrying a baby and shopping.”

While seeking asylum, Jennifer received vital support from the local Sudanese community. Jennifer, now 31, is doing voluntary work to help other asylum-seeking women in Leeds. She desperately wants to find paid work. “After I applied for asylum I wasn’t allowed to work. Staying at home with a small child, I felt I was losing my mind. Now I am trying to resume my career, but childcare is a big problem.

“In Sudan there is so much support from relatives. Here, women are on their own.”

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Mahdi

FROM IRAQ TO LIVERPOOL

Mahdi grew up in the holy city of Karbala, in the narrow streets surrounding one of Iraq's most sacred Shi'ite temples. But as a member of Iraq's persecuted Shi'ite majority, Mahdi lived in the shadow of repression.

One day, his father, a bookseller, was accused of selling banned religious texts and was taken away by Ba'ath party officials. Months later, Mahdi learned that his father had died at the hands of Saddam's brutal secret police. Soon afterwards, Mahdi joined an uprising against Saddam's dictatorship.

To crush the revolt, the authorities rounded up young men from all over Karbala. Mahdi was imprisoned for six months, but escaped and lived under a false identity before fleeing to the UK.

Dispersed to Liverpool, local youths hurled racist abuse and smashed his windows, leaving Mahdi feeling disorientated, isolated and anxious about the future.

"I was scared. I didn't have the confidence to talk to local people. But I told myself, 'you have to look to the future'. I found it hard to trust people because back home I was so used to looking over my shoulder."

In the end it was joining a football team that turned things round. With other refugees and local young people, Mahdi slowly began to overcome his isolation.

"Sport is a way to communicate without having perfect English. It frees my mind

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from my problems. It gave me confidence and I made new friends. It opened a door for me.”

Mahdi has now been granted leave to remain in the UK and has happily found a full-time job.

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Thérèse

FROM THE DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC OF CONGO TO THE UK AND THE USA

Thérèse is the daughter of one of the founders of the main opposition party in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). She lived in the capital city, Kinshasa. While there, she trained at university in international law, spent time as a trainee magistrate and worked in a developmental charity.

However, after taking part in a demonstration, Thérèse was targeted by government-backed secret police who kidnapped her and interrogated her for three days. She was beaten and raped but kept her real identity from them.

She was freed but discovered that the police had found out who she really was. She could not even go to work in her solicitors' office for fear of being caught. She was forced to flee, as were many of her brothers and sisters.

After paying an agent, she arrived in the UK and claimed asylum. She was refused at the first hearing but an appeal court judge granted her asylum. However, the Home Office challenged this. She eventually won the right to indefinite leave to remain at the end of 2005.

"I received the letter confirming my refugee status on Christmas Eve. I was so happy. When I opened the letter I screamed and shouted and I phoned my family to tell them and they were so relieved.

"Many of my family have been forced to flee too and are in various countries, but



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my father remains in the DRC. I was going to a party that night with other people from my country, and for me it was also a celebration of my status as well as Christmas.

"I am currently studying English for Business level 2 at college. In the next five years I hope that I can continue my career in law. To become a solicitor in the UK I need to study for a further two years, and to become a barrister I need to study for four years. I hope to become a solicitor in family law. What I have to look at now is how to finance this. I may find work in a shop or a similar job so I can save money. I also want to take an IT course, which will improve my skills.

"Before I had to flee I was married to my partner in a traditional wedding. We were planning our religious wedding when I had to leave. We have managed to keep in touch but have now been apart for two years. I want to be reunited with him so we can marry and start a family. I also want to be reunited with my brothers; this is the most important thing to me as I look to the next five years.

"It is not easy to integrate into the UK, and I would like to become fluent in English. I have not experienced racism but I have experienced some hostile attitudes, for instance from people in the street when you ask directions, and from staff in the hospital.

"This is a very different culture. For instance, I have been out at night and find people drink more alcohol and shout on the buses, which can be scary. I want to feel more a part of Britain, I want to gain more confidence and build a future."

UPDATE: Thérèse recently had a joyful reunion with her husband in the USA where they are now living.

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Ikraam

FROM SOMALIA TO BRISTOL

"I heard about the Refugee Awareness Project - RAP - in September 2005. I thought about how I am a refugee and have been an asylum seeker and how I have experienced it first-hand. I wanted to help people who are going through the same thing as I did. I can tell people that I know how it feels. I want British people to understand that we are also normal human beings who have faced persecution.

"When I came to the UK I was the only black person living in my area and I tried very hard to integrate, and I tried not to look different. Some people accept you and some people don't.

"Some people think asylum seekers come over here because of economic reasons rather than because their life is in danger. I have coped with all these problems.

"Before I met Jo, another volunteer on the Refugee Awareness Project, I only knew a few British people just to say hello to on the street - mostly other mums from my kids' school. I didn't really have close contact with anyone. As an asylum seeker, you are always being moved from place to place so when we first arrived, I was always too exhausted and stressed to meet people properly.

"I am very pleased that I am able to go out now and talk to people and get our messages out to them. The asylum system is far away from being what many people think it is. It is not an easy process, there are lots of checks, taking fingerprints and going through your story. The reality is far away from the perception. The system is not a soft touch.

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"With the Refugee Awareness Project, we tailor our talks to whoever we are working with. We will give a presentation about why people are here, about different countries.

"Sometimes I give people examples from my own experiences, and I tell them about how we suffered, how we survived and many of the difficult things we have experienced.

"In the first year, RAP is targeting young people. I think it's very important for young people who may meet asylum seekers or refugees in their schools or colleges or in their neighbourhoods to understand how they came to flee their country. Then they can understand asylum seekers and refugees are just like them, wanting to be a part of society.

"I enjoy being a part of RAP so much. I really want to see people integrate and mix. I don't want refugees to keep to themselves, and I want British people to learn about refugees and to welcome them.

"I've learnt that you can say what you want in this culture – when you feel isolated or frustrated, you can express that. And it's ok to say if you can't do something or you can't afford something. I've learnt that's it not something to be ashamed of. In my culture, it's really different, so now I have the confidence to feel and talk about what I want.

"I want to be even more independent though! I want to go forwards, not backwards. I want to have more self respect and pride in myself. I've now got a job and I don't need government support and benefits and I'm really proud of this. But I want to do more - there is still so much to learn. I want to study, read, write, drive, swim!"

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Peter

FROM SUDAN TO BOLTON, VIA UGANDA

"I was born in Southern Sudan, in Bantiu. I was a student studying at school in my village, living with my parents. When I was 15, government soldiers came to our village as they believed there were rebels in the village. They came at 6am on foot, in vehicles and they carried guns. Everyone left their homes. Me and my parents ran away too but I got separated from them as people fled. I did not know where they were, I used to cry all the time thinking about my mum and dad.

"So life in the beginning was not easy, I moved around until I reached Juba, near the border with Uganda. I stopped there for two and a half years. I joined the church and tried to learn English, as I wanted to integrate with the community.

"Then the war came again but by now I was mature and had married my wife, Joyce. But soldiers came there too and began fighting. When we heard the guns, we ran away with the others as we were near the border with Uganda - but I lost Joyce. I got to the border and got some transport to Kampala where I informed the police of my presence and they sent me to UNHCR, the UN refugee agency. My wife turned up too - that was wonderful.

"We entered the refugee camp in 1997. At that time we also had a son, Emmanuel, who was then three and we went on to have three more children, a boy and two girls. In the camp they firstly gave us tents and told us that this was our patch of land to build a shelter and dig a garden.

"The camp would sometimes be attacked by the Ugandan Lord's Resistance Army



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and they would take people from the community, like boys, to fight for them and men to join them.

“I became a camp social worker, helping disabled and elderly people as well as being a camp chairman, organising meetings and helping the community. We would meet with UNHCR and have discussions and sort things out together. Some of the hardest things were the lack of medicines and food.

“UNHCR gave out forms for resettlement overseas. I filled the forms out in 2000 but wasn’t interviewed until 2004. All we knew is that America and European countries didn’t have war, so we thought if we went there we could save our lives and our futures. We were screened, interviewed and medical checked by UNHCR until finally we were told we could resettle in the UK.

“We landed in Heathrow in 2006, and were taken to a hotel and given country orientation for three days before we were taken to Bolton. Some of the most surprising things I heard were that sometimes in the UK your neighbour might not greet you! They also told us that if children fight outside your house you can tell them not to but must then call the police. It did happen. My children were playing outside when some other children attacked them. I called the police and they came to get them.

“When I saw Bolton I felt very happy because the community here were so welcoming. When you come to the community you don’t know where to find things. The help from the Refugee Action caseworker was especially good. Our caseworker showed us how things worked; which buses to get into town, how to register for college, how to pay bills, how to find a GP.

“My wife Joyce is now working as a cleaner, although she would like to become a nurse. In the future I would like to be a social worker and I would like to study international relations so I am studying at college. The children have made many friends at school.

“But we always remember the people left in the camp. The situation for them has not changed.”

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Isa

FROM SUDAN TO LIVERPOOL

"When I was around ten my father and I escaped from Darfur when the conflict was intense and we went to Uganda. In Uganda my father was a truck driver and one time I went with him on a trip to northern Uganda and I was abducted. That's the last time I saw my father.

"I was with the rebels for six months. At just 14 I was made to kill people and loot and burn villages until I managed to escape.

"Then Ugandan soldiers caught me when I was running away. When I explained my situation, they took me in. But they forced me to go back and fight with the rebels to show them where they were. I insisted I couldn't because they would kill me so they said as I had been in Uganda illegally, they would send me back to Sudan. I was 15 then.

"When I went back to Sudan the Janjaweed were writing our names down. I said that I had been abducted by the rebels, but they didn't believe me. They tortured me, making me drink urine. I got raped and beaten. I kept on insisting that I wasn't a rebel and in the end they sent me to prison, but on the way there I managed to escape. I was bleeding so much I couldn't walk, so I hid myself for two days, eating bush weeds.

"Starving hungry, I started waving at cars to take me to Darfur when a man stopped. I asked him for a lift and he turned out to be a priest. We were going to go to Darfur but he was worried for my safety, so he took me to another town where I was undercover for about seven months with about 100 other youngsters.

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"One time the priest brought this man and told us, "This man will take you somewhere safe." He took pictures – I didn't know who he was.

"He brought me to England but I never knew where I was at the time. At the airport he said, "Don't talk to anyone, put your eyes down, this is serious now." I don't know which airport it was. I just did what he said.

"We had landed in the night and very early in the morning, we got in the car and went to Staffordshire police station. He gave me a piece of paper and told me to ask them to help me and left me there. I showed the police the paper but they just gave me the details for the Liverpool Home Office and sent me away.

"I walked and walked and came to a train station where I showed the paper to a man who I spoke to in very basic English. Once I showed him the paper he realised what I wanted. He let me stay at his house for the night, and gave me £20 in morning and told me to go by train to Liverpool.

"I now live in Liverpool. I go to college and I really want to go into medicine, something I've wanted since I was young. There is only one way out – if I have an opportunity to study. That's the best chance anyone can give you.

"I've made most of my friends through a youth project and a lot through playing football and a DJ course. I've also got the guy at Refugee Action - he has been there for me, trust me. He is linking me up to Medical Foundation for the Care for Victims of Torture and the doctor as I still have a problem with my bowels from the sexual assault and other stuff going on in my head.

"I am on discretional leave to remain until I am 18. They say I have no foundation to my claim because no-one's looking for me. But if I don't get refugee status, there is no point living. What's the point in living? At the end of the day it's the same thing – I'm going to be killed back home. That's why I'm seeing a psychiatrist and am on anti-depressants. All the trauma's coming back.

"One time, this boy was running away and they called me to cut his ears and his nose off and when I refused they sprained my leg and cut me. So I had to do it because if I didn't I would be killed.

"This boy comes to me every night, he's there bleeding..."

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