

refugee

inside:

Juliet Stevenson
breaking asylum myths
how you can help

Settling in

After spending 12 years in a Thai refugee camp, Pearl became one of 48 Burmese people to be resettled in Greater Manchester as part of the Gateway Protection Programme. Refugee Action workers are helping Pearl, her family and other Burmese arrivals adapt to their new life in the UK.

Pearl arrived in England in December last year. She said, "When we got on the plane to leave Thailand I was happy, but sad at the same time as I was leaving my country and people behind." Pearl and her children were among the most vulnerable refugees in the world, selected for resettlement in another country through the Gateway Protection Programme, a joint UN and Home Office scheme.

"We are Karen people, a minority, and were persecuted by the Burmese authorities," said Pearl. "Then at the end of 1994 our people separated into Buddhist and Christian factions and began fighting and we were told to get out quickly." Pearl, who had been working as a teacher, fled across the border into Thailand. She said, "We could hear the sound of gunfire. We were shocked as we never thought this would happen to us.

"The camp was very difficult at first. We had bamboo sticks and sheets to sleep under. We later made small houses out of leaves and bamboo. There were lots of diseases such as diarrhoea, skin diseases, respiratory infections and malaria."

Pearl was selected for resettlement in 2007. "When I heard I was going to England I was surprised. We had heard that England is a big country and very powerful. We were shown pictures of trams, cars and big buses, which we had not seen before, and brick houses."

The Burmese groups arrived at the end of 2007 and the beginning of this year. Groups from Ethiopia who had been living in camps in Kenya also arrived in March and April. They have been resettled in Bury and several other boroughs of Greater Manchester.

Rick Jones, the manager of Refugee Action's Gateway programme, said, "This is an important scheme which gives a future to men, women and children who have no prospect of returning to their countries and who live in difficult and sometimes dangerous conditions in refugee

camps. We are delighted to be working in partnership with a number of new local authorities who are helping to resettle these refugees."

Refugee Action resettlement workers are helping the refugees make a smooth transition into life in England. In the first week they are shown around their homes, introduced to the local area and transport systems and given information on how to pay bills and organise their lives. Each family is assigned a worker who will support them through the first year.

Since she arrived in December, Pearl has become a volunteer teaching assistant and her children are in school. She said, "If we didn't have Refugee Action I don't know what we would have done".

Dear Jacqui and David – it's good to talk

Thank you to Refugee Action campaigners who have put pressure on the government to stop using destitution to try to force asylum seekers to return to conflict zones.

How can our government condemn the world's worst human rights abusing regimes, and yet maintain a policy of forcing frightened people into destitution?

That is what Refugee Action asked Jacqui Smith, Home Secretary, and David Miliband, Foreign Secretary, in our latest campaign action. Over 700 campaigners signed a letter which we presented to this important pair in May.

We want to keep the pressure up on the government to live up to their commitment to protect people fleeing "indiscriminate violence".

Look out for campaign actions you can support in coming months:

- Join delegations to lobby decision-makers throughout the country
- Take part in campaign actions after the Independent Asylum Commission www.independentasylumcommission.org.uk reports findings from their 18-month long investigation into the UK asylum system.

For more information or to receive regular campaign news and actions email campaigns@refugee-action.org.uk or phone 020 7654 0683. Please do pass on info to friends and family too – your recommendations are the most powerful way of us increasing the effectiveness of our campaign.



Thanks to...

A massive thank you to all supporters who fundraised for Refugee Action recently...



Mrs Nice (pictured top left) asked guests at her 80th birthday party to donate to Refugee Action instead of bringing presents.

Simon (pictured bottom right) raised money for Refugee Action cycling from John O'Groats to Land's End, despite spraining a leg en route!

And Lucy and Sioned (pictured bottom left) also cycled the same route, raising over £1,100.



Ruth organised an art exhibition in London where sales from exhibits were donated to Refugee Action.

Katy ran the Paris half marathon and raised over £300.

Thank you to Frank Communications who gave a corporate donation of £450 to Refugee Action.

Also thanks to everyone who took part in Refugee Week this year with so many inspiring events around the country.

frankcommunications
DESIGN AND MULTIMEDIA

Gift Aid benefits donors too

Higher rate taxpayers (40%) can now benefit from Gift Aid when they donate to Refugee Action. While Refugee Action can reclaim the basic rate of tax on donations, high rate taxpayers can reclaim the difference between the gross donation and higher rate tax for themselves. For example, on a £100 donation we will receive £28.20 and the donor will receive £25.

Tax can be claimed back by including it in your Self Assessment Return or by writing to your tax office giving details of your Gift Aid donations.

- To find out more, visit www.hmrc.gov.uk/charities/donors/gift-aid.htm
- If you haven't signed our Gift Aid declaration yet, please call Emilie on 020 7654 7705 or download the form from www.refugee-action.org.uk/support/makeadonation.aspx#giftaid

Thought for the future

Thank you to all our supporters who have kindly included a gift to Refugee Action in their Will. This will ensure that in the years to come, asylum seekers fleeing conflict and persecution are welcomed and offered all the support they need to start a better life in safety.

To find out more about how to leave a gift to Refugee Action in your Will, please contact Emilie on 020 7654 7705.

spotlight on...

Lila Khodja

Refugee Awareness Project Coordinator,
Liverpool



I joined Refugee Action's Refugee Awareness Project (RAP) as a volunteer speaker in October 2005.

RAP aims to raise awareness among the public about asylum issues through talks to community groups by a local speaker and a refugee or asylum seeker. It operates in Liverpool, Bristol and Nottingham. The project uses really effective materials and activities which help the volunteers make the sessions interactive, non-judgemental, informative and fun.

I'd been working in South America and wanted to keep an international flavour to my work. RAP sounded like something I could get my teeth into, so I volunteered and was trained-up and quite quickly deployed into the community to deliver my first session. I was petrified and froze when a participant asked about Iran's disaster management strategy?! But I must have done something right, as eight months later I got the job as Liverpool's RAP Coordinator.

I now manage Liverpool's 20-strong volunteer team of 'RAPpers'. Merseysiders don't mince their words and take their volunteering roles very seriously! But it's the variety of my job that really keeps me going. A typical week can include persuading organisations that what they really want is one of our excellent sessions, training prospective volunteers, organising awareness-raising events, and all the time supporting RAP volunteers – the project's life-blood. Watching asylum seeker volunteers stand-up together with local volunteers in front of an audience, answering tricky questions and mixing in their very personal story with such impact, is really fantastic.

RAP is a massively ambitious feat and Refugee Action's first large-scale foray into the world of informing community attitudes. Nonetheless, again and again feedback forms say: 'actually, we don't know anything about these people and we should' and 'everyone should see one of these sessions!'

All three of the volunteer teams have been nominated for the Queen's Award for Volunteering and the project has really helped change attitudes. Thanks to all our supporters for their generous donations towards the Refugee Awareness Project.



Saying it with style

The Refugee Awareness Project has created a whole array of stylish materials which educate about asylum with humour and without preaching.

Our *Mobiles, Money and Mayhem – the facts and fibs about asylum* booklet is particularly popular and is being distributed by schools, colleges, in council offices, among police staff, and all sorts of businesses and agencies. *Make your neighbourhood nicer: how to welcome refugees and asylum seekers in 11 easy steps*, is a follow-on booklet.

How you can help:

- book a RAP session for a group you're involved in if you live near Liverpool, Bristol or Nottingham
- order RAP booklets to give out at work, in your community or just for friends and family
- if you haven't done so yet, please give a much needed donation towards RAP to help it continue its ground-breaking work

Contact Esme Peach
esmep@refugee-action.org.uk
or call 020 7654 0673.

upcoming events



Adidas 5k run 7 September

Join Refugee Action's team for the Adidas Women's 5km challenge, on Sunday 7 September 2008 in Birmingham, Liverpool and London. Run, jog or walk 5km and raise money for Refugee Action.

If you are interested in taking part contact Emilie at giving@refugee-action.org.uk or call on 020 7654 7705.



Be a festival volunteer

Refugee Action is taking to the road with interactive stalls at the Rise Festival in London on 13 July, and the Greenbelt Festival in Cheltenham during 22–25 August. We need volunteers to help keep the stalls buzzing.

If you're planning on attending the festivals and could help us for a few hours, please get in touch with Jenny Dawkins, Campaigns Officer: 020 7654 0683 or jennyd@refugee-action.org.uk. Please respond by 7 July for Rise and 28 July for Greenbelt.

Spend, Spend, Give

Shop online and raise money for Refugee Action. Go to www.easyfundraising.org.uk and register to raise funds when you shop online by nominating Refugee Action as your chosen charity. This free fundraising service allows you to choose from over 500 online retailers and when you shop using the links on the easyfundraising site. Up to 15 per cent from every purchase is donated to Refugee Action without costing you a penny extra.

One-minute fundraiser

Change your search engine to everyclick.com and register Refugee Action as your chosen charity. Every click you make raises money to support our work.

Keep informed get involved

Your support in campaigning is invaluable. **Please sign up at our website. Go to www.refugee-action.org.uk/campaigns to register your details.** We will keep you updated about our campaigning work and how you can get involved.



why I support refugees

Juliet Stevenson, *BAFTA-nominated British actress*

I think I've always been interested in migration – in people who have to move and shift – as I spent my childhood on the move. We were an army family and sometimes I never felt I came from anywhere.

My role in *Death and the Maiden* in 1990 at the Royal Court theatre really triggered a more proactive involvement in refugee issues. I played a woman who had been tortured under the Pinochet regime. To research the role I met with Chileans who had sought refuge in the UK in the '70s. All of them had been tortured in Chile. I met so many inspirational people and became involved with various refugee charities like the Medical Foundation for the Care of Victims of Torture and Salusbury World.

An actor's job description is inhabiting other people's lives and telling others about those lives. It is an act of imagining. So I think there definitely is a place for actors to use their skills... a place for those of us whose job it is to give voice – to give voice to those who live amongst us but don't have a voice.

Recently I was involved in *Motherland* – a production we put on at the Young Vic this Mother's Day with Women for Refugee Women (WRW). After visiting women and children asylum seekers at Yarl's Wood detention centre in Bedfordshire with WRW's Natasha Walter – a brutal prison-like place where asylum seekers are held – we decided we had to find a way of telling their stories. *Motherland* was a collection of their testimonies played out by actors including myself and my daughter.

People just don't know about places like Yarl's Wood. And they have to know. But I wanted people to feel they could do something. And that's what happened. People have been inspired to do radio pieces, talk about the issues raised by *Motherland* in schools, offer legal representation to people, all sorts of things.

Proud but dismayed

I'm appalled by the way asylum seekers and refugees are treated by our asylum system. It's a cruel and unjust system that infringes basic human rights. I'm proud to live in a country that offers refuge to people but I am dismayed that it treats people fleeing conflict, torture and persecution in this way.

There is a huge manipulation of the asylum issue and the numbers involved in the tabloid press. The numbers are in reality so small, we can afford to be generous in granting protection to those that need it. I'm not naive, I know immigration is complicated. But asylum – offering sanctuary to

people in genuine need of protection – is different from immigration and cannot be dealt with in the same way.

An unjust system

We really have to revise the system. The way the government is using destitution as a deterrent is appalling. It is abhorrent the way that it's impossible for people to work or draw benefits if they are refused asylum but can't return. Policies like destitution show that the system is putting number-crunching before justice.

I wanted people to feel they could do something.

In the fast-track system people's cases are judged within days of their arrival under very difficult circumstances, sometimes with no proper legal representation, no suitable interpreter and without people properly understanding the system they are in. Women also have to 'prove' they have been raped and declare it as soon as they arrive. The culture of disbelief in the Home Office is pervasive and renders women powerless in the face of it.

In an area of enormous public ignorance like asylum, the government should be taking the lead and be informing people... not basing policies on people's misinformed impressions. I find this form of consensus government shameful. In effect asylum – offering sanctuary – is nothing to do with migration, but asylum policy is used as a tool to appease public fears about immigration. And the people that suffer most from this are the most fragile members of the migrant population and society in general – people fleeing war, persecution and brutalisation.

Demanding fair hearings for women

Over 1,000 people saw Juliet Stevenson star in three sell-out performances of *Motherland* at London's Young Vic, organised by Women for Refugee Women and supported by Refugee Action. Audience members signed a Mother's Day card to Harriet Harman, Minister for Women and Equalities, asking her to push for better treatment for women seeking asylum, including an end to the detention of vulnerable women and children.



Refugee Action is a biannual newsletter to keep our supporters updated on the work of Refugee Action and refugee issues in the UK.

The total cost of each newsletter is only 14p. However, we don't want to waste resources by sending unwanted mail so please do let us know if you don't want to receive future copies of the newsletter.

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