

**REFUGEES AND ASYLUM SEEKERS  
THE TRUTH BEHIND THE MYTHS 2013**





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## THE BRITISH RED CROSS AND REFUGEES

The Red Cross has a long tradition of providing practical and emotional support to vulnerable refugees and asylum seekers in the UK.

We help refugees adjust to life in the UK in a number of ways – from providing emergency provisions for those facing severe hardship, to giving orientation support and friendly advice to those settling in a new, unfamiliar place.

## REFUGEES: THE TRUTH BEHIND THE HEADLINES



Do these sound familiar? They should: they're all real British newspaper headlines. For years now, those who come to the UK seeking shelter have been given a largely negative press.

A 2012 survey\* found that the words people most associate with media coverage of refugees and asylum seekers are 'illegal immigrants' and 'scroungers'. This is far from the truth (and far from helpful), but it is true that understanding such a complex issue can be a headache.

That's why we've produced this guide to put all the main facts and details at your fingertips.

\*Conducted by YouGov on behalf of the British Red Cross

## REFUGEES: FACT FROM FICTION

We're all familiar with the scare stories about asylum seekers 'flooding' the UK. But how do these tales of mass invasion stand up against the statistical data?

### HOW MANY OF THE WORLD'S DISPLACED COME TO THE UK?

In 2011, less than three per cent.

### HOW MUCH OF TOTAL IMMIGRATION NUMBERS DO ASYLUM SEEKERS ACCOUNT FOR IN THE UK?

Total long-term immigration to the UK in 2010: 572,000

Asylum applications in the UK in 2010: 17,790

Asylum seekers account for just 3% of total immigration in the UK

### HOW MANY ASYLUM SEEKERS ARE ALLOWED TO STAY IN THE UK?

In 2012, just 36 per cent of asylum decisions made by the Home Office resulted in a grant of status, allowing the applicant to remain in the UK.

## WHICH COUNTRIES DO REFUGEES COME FROM?

By the end of 2011, more than 42 million\* people throughout the world had been forcibly displaced and were of concern to the United Nations. Twenty-six million of these people were displaced within the borders of their home country, and the rest became refugees or asylum seekers.

In 2011, the most refugees came from Afghanistan, Iraq, Somalia, Sudan and the Democratic Republic of Congo.

Eighty per cent of the world's refugees are hosted in a neighbouring country. Only a small proportion of people make it to the UK to claim asylum. In 2011, the countries hosting the most refugees were\*:

**PAKISTAN** 1,702,000 refugees

**IRAN** 886,500 refugees

**SYRIA** 755,400 refugees

**GERMANY** 571,700 refugees

**KENYA** 566,500 refugees

\*UNHCR Global Trends Report 2011. All other figures: Home Office

## WHAT DO THE TERMS MEAN?

### ASYLUM SEEKER

- > flees their homeland
- > arrives in another country
- > makes themselves known to the authorities
- > submits an asylum application
- > has a legal right to stay in the country while awaiting a decision.

### REFUGEE

- > has proven to the authorities that they would be at risk if returned to their home country
- > has had their claim for asylum accepted by the government.

### REFUSED ASYLUM SEEKER

- > has been unable to prove that they would face persecution back home
- > has been denied protection by the authorities
- > has been told to leave the country.

### ECONOMIC MIGRANT

- > has moved to another country to work
- > could be legally or illegally resident, depending on how they entered the country
- > may or may not have a legal work permit.

## SIX CAUSES FOR CONCERN

Far from having an easy ride, refugees and asylum seekers often face severe difficulties once they arrive in the UK. Our key concerns are explored on the following pages.

Photo © Lauren Thompson/BBC



**“I want to work – to contribute and feed my family. That’s the way I was brought up”**

Abdul, Afghanistan

### 1. NO PERMISSION TO WORK

In 2002, asylum seekers lost permission to work. It can take many months, and even years, for an asylum claim to be decided. As a result, many skilled and able people are forced to live on hand-outs.

In the current economic climate, unemployment rates are high. However, denying asylum seekers permission to work makes no economic sense.

It can lead to increased poverty, dependency, social isolation, exploitation (especially for women), low self-esteem and loss of confidence. Many asylum seekers contribute to their local community by doing voluntary work.

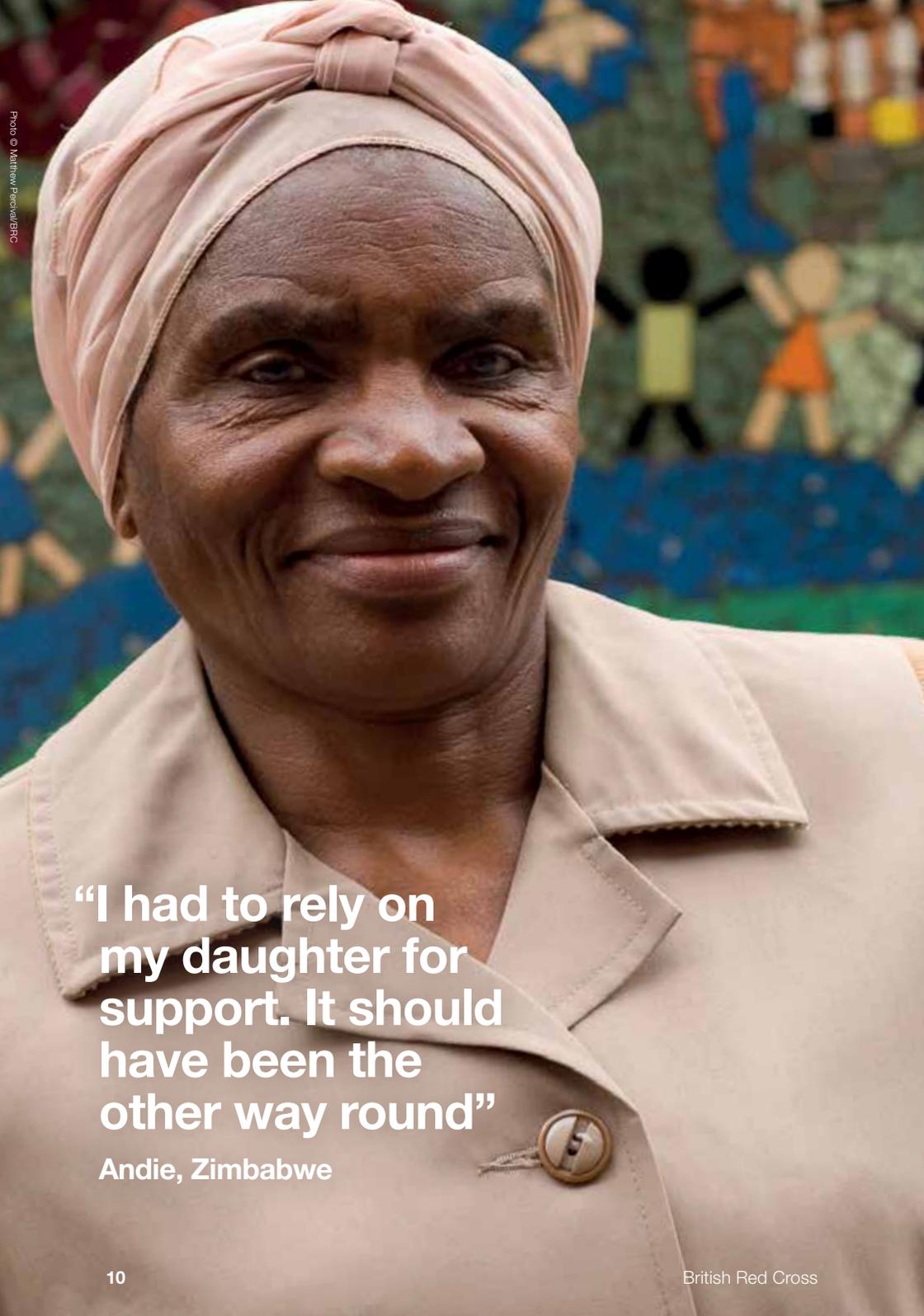


Photo © Matthew Pechall/BBC

**“I had to rely on my daughter for support. It should have been the other way round”**

Andie, Zimbabwe

## 2. DESTITUTION

Sadly, destitution is a way of life for a lot of asylum seekers and refugees living in the UK. Some people reach the end of the asylum process and are unable to return home, but a significant number also become destitute due to administrative errors and failings within the system.

Once refugee status is granted, the Home Office stops providing support after just 28 days. This leaves refugees very little time to complete the paperwork needed to seek employment, find alternative housing and receive further support. This can lead to destitution and homelessness, despite the fact that the refugee has been given permission to remain in the UK.

At best, destitute asylum seekers and refugees might receive handouts from local charities or faith groups, or find a friend's floor to sleep on. But the impact of destitution on these vulnerable people can be devastating – impacting both their physical and mental health.

Administrative errors or communications failings between government departments need to be eradicated. People should not end up destitute because they seek asylum.

### 3. FAMILY REUNION

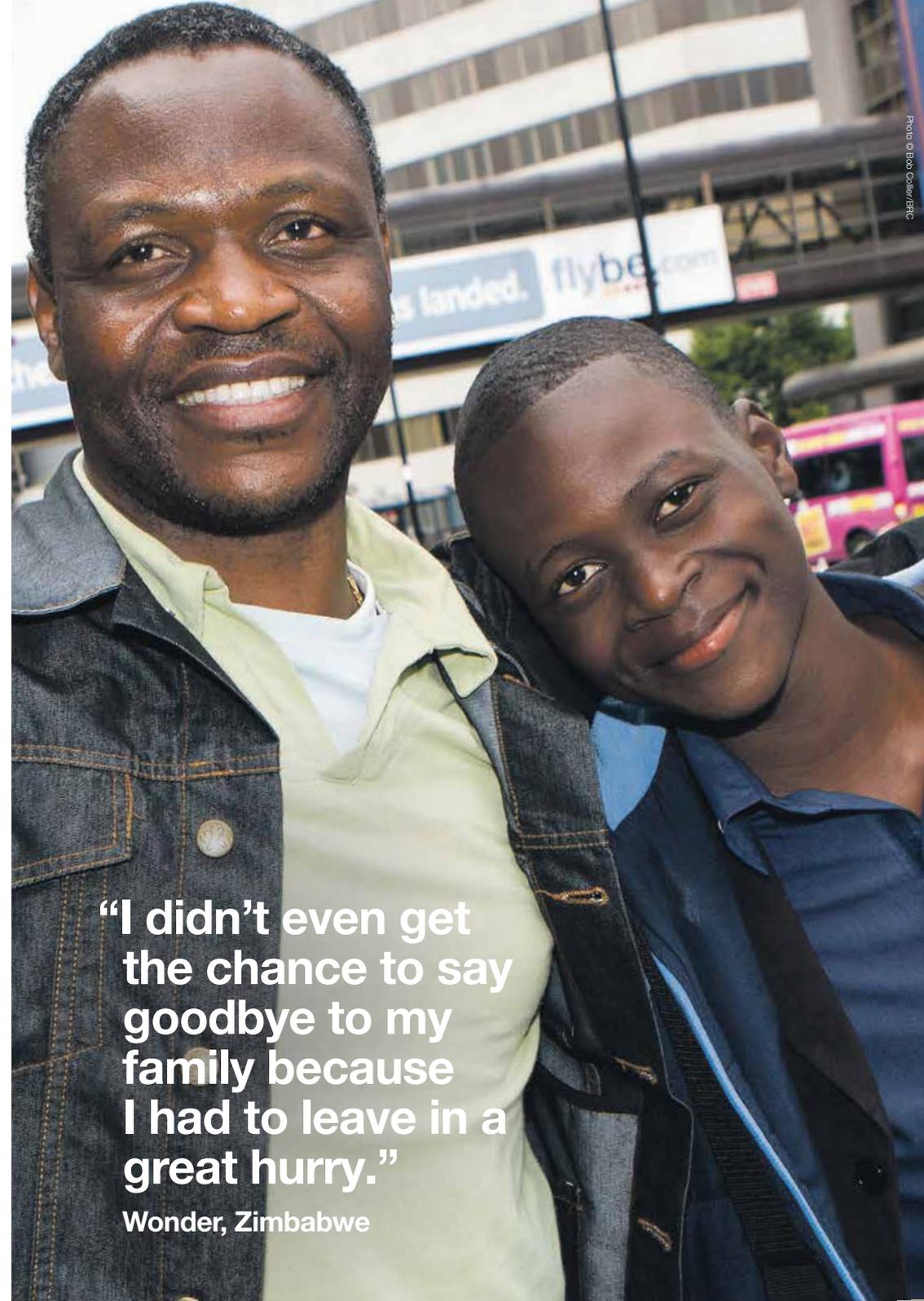
When families flee a country at short notice due to fear of persecution, they can often become separated.

Refugees are entitled under law to bring their immediate family members to the UK. However, applications to be united with their family are often complex, requiring support from an immigration solicitor.

Until April 2013, refugees wishing to apply for family reunion could receive legal aid. Due to government cuts, this is no longer available.

The changes to legal aid will make it difficult for many refugees to successfully apply for a family reunion. This could lead to many families remaining separated, despite their legal right to a reunion.

We believe that legal aid is vital in enabling refugees to be reunited with their families, and are calling on the government to re-introduce family reunion into the scope of legal aid.



**“I didn’t even get the chance to say goodbye to my family because I had to leave in a great hurry.”**

**Wonder, Zimbabwe**



**“I missed out on being a teenager and had to grow up fast. I was scared and alone”**

Asha, Somalia



**“We had a four-month-old baby. It was very difficult for my wife when I was taken away”**

Douglas, Zimbabwe

#### 4. YOUNG REFUGEES

A number of young asylum seekers have their ages disputed by the UK Border Agency and/or social services. Unable to provide birth certificates as proof of age, some children are initially assessed as being over 18.

The consequences are worrying. Confused, vulnerable children, who have arrived in Britain without any family, are processed through the asylum system as adults. They are then faced with the unsettling prospect of sharing accommodation with adults who are strangers to them.

We believe that every separated asylum-seeking child should have someone to advocate on their behalf.

#### 5. DETENTION

There are 12 detention centres in the UK. An increasing number of people are detained when they arrive in the UK and will remain detained while their asylum claim is processed.

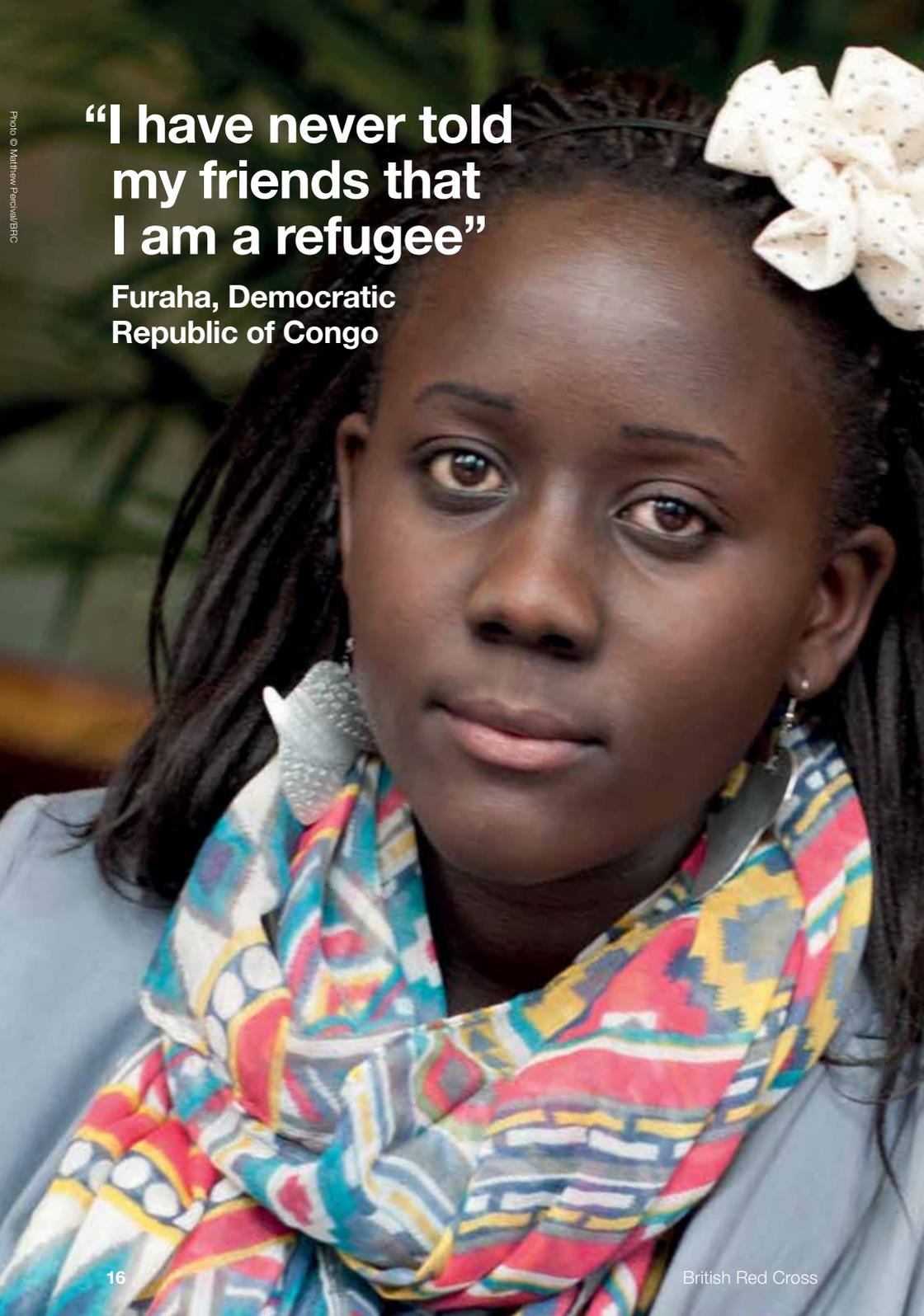
There is no time limit to detention, even though people have not committed any crime. In some cases, people are detained for several months with serious implications for their physical and mental health.

Despite immigration rules stating that torture survivors, those with serious health problems and pregnant women should not normally be detained, there is evidence to show that these rules are not always followed.

We believe detention should only be used as a last resort and should be time-limited.

**“I have never told my friends that I am a refugee”**

**Furaha, Democratic Republic of Congo**



## 6. REFUGEE STEREOTYPES

Over the years, some media stories have consistently linked the asylum issue to words like ‘bogus’, ‘sponger’ or ‘criminal’. These stories have contributed to the negative attitudes towards refugees and asylum seekers.

In a 2012 poll\*, the majority of people thought immigration had a negative effect on levels of crime and disorder in Britain, and on the availability of housing and jobs.

The real numbers of refugees are much lower than many people realise. In the poll, four out of ten people thought that more than ten per cent of people in Britain today had been granted asylum. One in 20 believed that the majority of the British population are refugees.

The true figure is less than one per cent.

\*British Future State of the Nation Report 2012



“I’m so grateful for all the help the Red Cross has given me”

## ALIA’S STORY

**Fleeing your home and arriving in a new country can be traumatic. Once someone does get refugee status, the Red Cross can be on hand to provide orientation support and help them settle into an unfamiliar environment.**

After fleeing torture and persecution in Eritrea, Alia\* arrived in the UK and was relocated to Newport in South Wales, where she was granted refugee status and put in touch with the Red Cross.

As a new arrival, she was alone in an unfamiliar country and desperately needed help during her first few months in the city. Besides providing emotional support and a friendly presence, the Red Cross accompanied Alia to the doctors, bought second-hand furniture for her flat and even helped get her gas and electricity connected.

Looking back later, Alia said: “I’m so happy that I’ve been able to settle into my new home – I’ve even got an interview for a job with a local bakery. I’m so grateful for all the help the Red Cross has given me to help me settle in the UK.”

\*Name has been changed to protect identity

## DID YOU KNOW?

The UK asylum system is strictly controlled and complex. The decision-making process is extremely tough and many people’s claims are rejected.

There were 21,785 asylum applications to the UK in 2012<sup>1</sup>. This is fewer asylum applications than France, Germany or Sweden.

Most asylum seekers are living in poverty and experience poor health and hunger<sup>2</sup>.

Almost all asylum seekers are not allowed to work and are forced to rely on state support – this can be as little as £5 a day.

Immigrants, including refugees, pay more into the public purse than people born in the UK<sup>3</sup>.

About 1,200 medically qualified refugees are recorded on the British Medical Association’s database<sup>4</sup>.

It costs an estimated £25,000 to support a refugee doctor to practise in the UK. Training a new doctor is estimated to cost between £200,000 and £250,000<sup>5</sup>.

1. Home Office quarterly immigration statistics 2012.

2. Independent Asylum Commission citizens’ inquiry in *The Independent*, 22 October 2007.

3. Institute for Public Policy Research, *Paying their way: the fiscal contribution of immigrants in the UK*, 2005.

4. BMA/Refugee Council refugee doctor database, 4 June 2008.

5. *Reaping the rewards: re-training refugee healthcare professionals for the NHS*, October 2009, NHS Employers.



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**REFUSING  
TO IGNORE  
PEOPLE  
IN CRISIS**



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