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Tough asylum policy 'hits genuine refugees'

Claimant crackdown more than meets government's target but is slated by welfare groups for denying those in desperate need

Alan Travis, home affairs editor

A much bigger than expected fall in new asylum applications in Britain prompted claims yesterday that the government's "tough policy" was now denying protection for "genuine refugees".

The official asylum figures published yesterday show the monthly total between April and June this year averaged 3,500 new applications, a figure far below the 4,500 target set by Tony Blair in February when he promised to halve the number coming to Britain by this September.

The dramatic drop in those claiming asylum has been accompanied by a continuing expansion in people entering the country through legal migration routes. In 2002, the right of permanent settlement in Britain was granted to 115,895 people - an 8% increase on the previous year. A further 120,000 applicants were admitted to the country on short-term work permits - an increase of 10%.

The number of people who became new British citizens soared by 33% to a new record high of 115,000 people last year. The Home Office said that 56% of foreign-born people who had lived in the UK for more than six years were now British citizens.

The latest quarterly asylum figures published yesterday show the number of asylum seekers coming to Britain has declined from a monthly peak of 8,900 during last October to 3,600 in the month of June this year. This marks the lowest intake level for five years.

Home Office statisticians cited a mixture of global trends and domestic measures to explain the fall. Iraqi applications have fallen by 70% since the war, to about an average of 200 a month. Zimbabwe applications have fallen from 600 to 275 a month following the imposition of a visa regime last November.

The Home Office also said the introduction of a "white list" of countries - from which applications were presumed to be unfounded - had halved the number of applicants from those countries. The largest numbers of claims now come from Somalia and Zimbabwe. There was a sharp rise in applications from India, possibly because of the increasing violence in Gujarat.

The new figures fail to clarify, however, whether the refusal, since February, of state benefits to those who fail to claim asylum as soon as they get to Britain, has had much impact on the proportion claiming asylum "in country" some time after they arrive.

The annual asylum figures for 2002, also published yesterday alongside the quarterly data, show that there were, in total, 84,130 asylum applications last year. The figures also reveal that 42% of those who applied were given official permission to stay in the country - a far cry from the tabloid myth that nearly all asylum seekers are bogus.

The home secretary, David Blunkett, opted to introduce, in April, a less broad form of "humanitarian protection" for those who fall short of qualifying for full refugee status. But the official "recognition rate" for this category has fallen, from 22% last year to 7%.

The number of failed asylum seekers who were deported from Britain reached a record 10,740 in 2002, and the latest figures show that more than 1,300 were detained pending their removal in June this year.

Mr Blunkett claimed the figures demonstrated that the "tough measures" of the government, including the closure of the Sangatte Red Cross refugee centre near Calais, were working.

He said: "The notion that nothing can be done and government action is failing is clearly proven to be wrong by today's figures. The changing situation in Afghanistan, Iraq and Sri Lanka, has also played a part and this is reflected elsewhere in Europe. But claims have fallen more than twice as much in the UK as elsewhere in Europe because of our tough measures."

He welcomed the increase in the number of new migrants coming to Britain on official schemes and said that he would encourage this with the introduction of ceremonies alongside the tests on the English language and British life.

But refugee welfare and human rights groups claimed the tougher asylum policy has meant denying help to those who need it.

The Refugee Council said the tighter restrictions were unlikely to prove a sustainable method of reducing numbers in the long run: "Simply preventing people from entering the UK cannot be referred to as a success when some of those people may be in desperate need of our help," said Maeve Sherlock, the council's chief executive.

Amnesty International said setting a target on asylum seekers was "an insult to those who have fled persecution, torture and possible death".

Heaven Crawley, of the Institute of Public Policy Research, said that if the government's policy of deterring economic migrants while protecting genuine refugees was successful, the numbers getting full refugee status should be rising. "The fact that they are not suggests the measures fail to differentiate between those who are in need of protection and those who are not."

But the anti-immigration pressure group, MigrationwatchUK, claimed that Britain was still the number one asylum destination in the industrialised world.