

DR. CAROLINE LUCAS

Green Party
for the South East of England

Rt Hon Liam Byrne MP
Minister for Immigration
Home Office
50 Queen Anne's Gate
London SW1H 9AT

February 6th 2007

Dear Liam,

As you are aware, from previous correspondence, I have grave concerns about many aspects of this government's asylum policy. As I understand it, a key element of the current approach is determining whether or not there is a risk that individuals would be targeted on returning home, because they have made an asylum claim. Evidence from two organisations working in my constituency leads me to believe that much more could be done to verify and monitor the safety of failed asylum seekers.

I am sure you are sensitive to the discrimination faced by Ahwazi Arabs in Iran. Yet Ahwazi asylum seekers are routinely returned to Iran and very little appears to be done to ascertain whether or not their safety is guaranteed. Indeed, NGOs, working with Ahwazi families here in the UK and in Iran, claim that returned individuals are routinely arrested and interrogated by the Iranian authorities. In some instances, officials appear to have been in possession of documentation submitted to the Home Office under the asylum claim procedures. You will appreciate that suspicion and fear in these circumstances is very high, and the Foreign Office's refusal, to date, to release details of the government's operational understanding with Iran on the return of asylum seekers - invoking public interest and potential damage to international relations - only serves to worsen the problem. NGOs have been advised that there is no Memorandum of Understanding on the subject, as there is with Libya, so how are courts expected to properly assess the risks for returned asylum seekers? Is the Home Office collating data from returned individuals to inform this process and, if not, does it have any plans to do so?

The same questions apply in relation to many countries, but another that has been brought to my particular attention is that of the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). Reports from human rights activists working in DRC confirm that many returned asylum seekers are illegally imprisoned and that their families are subjected to attacks and intimidation. Again, there have been allegations that files are handed over to the Congolese authorities by those escorting asylum seekers back to the country.

I appreciate that the official government line is that both DRC and Iran are relatively safe and that returned asylum seekers are not singled out in any way for mistreatment. According to IND statements, this position is based on the lack of any clear evidence to suggest the systematic targeting of failed asylum seekers. I would argue that the UK government has a moral responsibility to carry out its own monitoring to ensure that this is in fact not the case. Asylum seekers are individuals, each with a very unique set of circumstances and reasons for seeking asylum. To claim that there is no 'systematic' mistreatment of asylum seekers, serves to undermine this individuality and treat everyone as the same - and thereby potentially failing to identify those, perhaps very few, who may very well be at risk. If the government are so certain

that there are no risks, surely the collection of data on failed asylum seekers would seek to bolster their position and silence critics?

To conclude, I would urge the Home Office to introduce monitoring for failed and returned asylum seekers, both as a means of better verifying the potential risks and of more fully informing those responsible for granting or refusing asylum. I very much look forward to your response.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Caroline Lucas'. The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first name 'Caroline' written in a larger, more prominent script than the last name 'Lucas'.

Caroline Lucas - Green Party MEP for South East England.