

# Thousands of failed asylum seekers rely on charities for food, says Red Cross

Government urged to reform 'shameful' system said to have left up to 20,000 destitute

[Amelia Gentleman](#)

[The Guardian](#), Wednesday 16 June 2010

Up to 20,000 failed asylum seekers are living in the UK in conditions of destitution, relying on [charities](#) for food, a Red Cross report will say today, criticising the government's asylum system as "shameful" and "inhumane".

A network of Red Cross "destitution clinics" across the country gives out food vouchers and food parcels to thousands of refused asylum seekers every week, work that officials describe as similar to their distribution of emergency humanitarian aid in countries such as Sudan.

"This is a serious humanitarian situation for these very vulnerable people," Nicholas Young, chief executive of the Red Cross, said. "We do feel that this needs to be tackled by the government because there appears to be a deliberate strategy to make people destitute ... for centuries refugees have been coming to this country and receiving kind treatment. It is a shame that is not the case now."

Because many refused asylum seekers no longer register with the Home Office, it is hard to get precise figures about the scale of the problem. Asylum organisations estimate that around 200,000 people have been refused asylum but remain in the country. Most are being sheltered by friends, but the Red Cross estimates that up to 20,000 are wholly dependent on charities for food, some of them sleeping on the streets, in garages and in hedges.

"In many cases they experience exploitation, overcrowded living conditions, street homelessness, physical and mental illnesses and malnourishment," the report states.

Once an asylum request is refused, the asylum seeker is no longer eligible to receive any state support and remains prohibited from working. "You can remove people back to their home country, or you can keep them here. But you have to give people food. You cannot starve people out of the country," said Joseph Nibizi, who runs the Red Cross food distribution centre for asylum seekers in Birmingham.

The charity is calling for a support system that will ensure that individuals have the right to work, and access to healthcare, throughout their application until they are either granted leave to stay or helped to leave the country.

The Red Cross usually focuses on emergency relief, steering clear of political controversy and only occasionally taking on a campaigning role; its decision to publish today's report reflects its conviction that the situation is worsening.

The current system already has a safety net of hardship support, known as "section 4", which is available for those who have been refused asylum but are taking steps to return to their own country, or who are appealing against the decision. But until they have put together a new submission which is accepted by the Home Office, they are not eligible for any support. Later this support can be hard to access, the report states, and some are unwilling to apply for it because they do not want to return home.

A survey by the charity revealed that 87% often survived on only one meal a day, with six out of 10 destitute for more than a year.

Campaigners argue that refusal of asylum does not automatically mean the request was not legitimate. Last year 28% of people who appealed against asylum refusal were granted leave to remain, a figure that activists say reflects serious flaws in the process. About half of those whose claim is rejected come from countries such as Congo, Iraq, Zimbabwe, Sudan, Somalia and Eritrea where there is conflict.

Damian Green, minister for immigration, said: "The government is committed to exploring new ways of improving the current asylum system. The UK Border Agency provides support to asylum seekers who would otherwise be destitute until a decision on their application is made.

"However, when the independent courts have decided that an asylum seeker does not need international protection, support is discontinued and we expect them to return home voluntarily. Where a refused asylum seeker does not return voluntarily we will take removal action.

"Where a person faces a temporary barrier to their return which is not their fault, we will provide support until that barrier is removed if they would otherwise be destitute."