

Refugee Footballers in Britain

In an IPSOS Mori Survey carried out with refugees in 2010, 42% of respondents said that football was one of the three things they like most about living in Britain. This was slightly behind 'the British people' and just ahead of 'multicultural society'.

A refugee is a person from another country who has been given permission to remain in the UK for their own protection.

An asylum seeker is a person who has applied for protection and is awaiting a decision on this.

People are forced to leave their homes and seek protection for many reasons:

- _____ **Political protest**
- _____ **Civil War**
- _____ **Ethnic minority in their country**
- _____ **Religious persecution**
- _____ **Infringement of civil liberties**



Most refugees seek sanctuary in neighbouring countries but some travel much further in the hope of greater protection. The UK is home to under 2% of the world's refugees – out of 16 million worldwide – amounting to less than 1/2 % of the British population.

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Asylum seekers do not jump the queue for council housing and they cannot choose where they live. The accommodation allocated to them is not paid for by the local council. It is nearly always 'hard to let' properties, where other people do not want to live.

75% of asylum applications are initially refused. 28% of those decisions are changed following an appeal. This means that for more than 1 in 4 people who are told, 'No, you're not eligible for protection here,' the decision is found to be incorrect.

In 2009, more than 1,000 child asylum seekers in Britain were being held captive in prison-like detention centres awaiting enforced removal from this country due to their appeals for asylum not being strong enough.

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The History of Refugee Footballers in Britain

Refugees have been coming to Britain to seek asylum for many, many years; arguably since the 17th Century.

In the first half of the 20th Century, significant numbers of refugees were welcomed to Britain seeking sanctuary from fascist regimes dominating other parts of Europe.

Some of the earliest refugees to play in the English football league were those from the Basque Country in Northern Spain and Hungarians following the 1956 uprising.

Basque Country

This region of Spain formed the strongest resistance to General Franco's fascist dictatorship during the Spanish Civil War (1936-1939). As a result, in 1937 as many as 4000 Basque refugee children were put on boats bound for the safe haven provided by Britain. Among them were **Emilio Aldecoa**, **Raimundo Perez Lezama** and the **Gallego** brothers who all played professional football in England.

Emilio Aldecoa

Born – 1922 (Bilbao, Spain)

A striker and winger, Aldecoa became the first Spaniard to play in the English League when he played for Coventry in the 1946-7 season. Before that, he had played wartime football for Wolves from 1943 and Coventry from 1945. In 1947, he returned to Spain where he had a successful career with Athletic Bilbao, Real Valladolid, Barcelona and Sporting de Gijón, winning two league titles with Barcelona. He also made one appearance for Spain. In the 1960s, he had a spell as assistant manager of Birmingham City.

Raimundo Pérez Lezama

Born – 1922 (Barakaldo, Spain)

Lezama came to England aged 14 to escape the Spanish Civil War in 1937. He was a goalkeeper who played 3 wartime games for Southampton in 1940. He also worked briefly as a driver in the Royal Air Force. He then returned to Spain and played for Athletic Bilbao. He won 2 Spanish league medals and 6 Spanish cup winners medals, and played once for Spain.

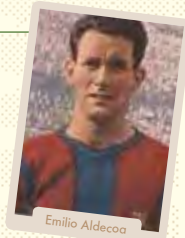
Jose Gallego

Born – 1923 (Errenteria, Spain)

Gallego arrived in England as a 14-year old, his father and sister having already been killed during the war. His mother put him along with his three other sisters and his younger brother, Antonio, on a boat to escape the troubles. The family settled in Cambridge where José first played football with Cambridge City in 1942. In 1945, he was joined by Antonio in the Cambridge City side who went on to have a short career as goalkeeper of Norwich City.

In January 1947, José moved to Brentford, then in the Football League Second Division, where he stayed for a season and a half, making six league appearances. He followed this with short spells at Southampton and Colchester before returning to Cambridge where he played part time for Cambridge United.

After retiring, he spent 30 years as a gas meter inspector in Cambridge playing minor league football into his 50s.



Hungary

More than 20,000 Hungarian refugees made their way to Britain for their own safety following the 1956 uprising against the Communist regime. Amongst them were **Béla Oláh** and **Johnny Haasz**.



Dover F.C. 1966-67 - Béla Oláh in front row, 4th from left, Chris Collins (Dover Athletic historian)

Béla Oláh

Born – 1938 (Ózd, Hungary)

Oláh had begun to make a name for himself as a footballer playing in Hungary's top division at the age of 15 when the 1956 uprising forced him to make the difficult decision to leave his mother and family to seek out a new life elsewhere. Having successfully crossed the Hungarian border, only to unwittingly re-enter the country at a different point, he eventually made it to Austria.

He then chose to come to England because, "England was a world soccer force, second then only to Hungary." His love of the game drew Béla to local park football where he was spotted by the manager of Bedford Town. An opportunity for advancement arose when he signed, initially as an amateur, for Northampton Town playing in Division 4. FA rules at the time stated that he could only play professionally once he had been in the country for two years. He played for Northampton 48 times between December 1958 and 1961 before going on to play for several other Southern League clubs including five years at Hastings United and an enjoyable period in a managerial role at Rye United.

Johnny Haasz

Born – 1937 (Budapest, Hungary)

Haasz had been a footballer in Hungary for Legiera, but once in England, also found himself banned from playing. This was because FIFA upheld a ban imposed by the Hungarian FA, which considered him to be a 'deserter'. In Hungary, he was involved in guerrilla activity against the Soviet occupying forces, and while on the run, had to hide in an occupied coffin in a graveyard! He first fled to Austria before moving on to England, as he had a friend who lived here.

By 1960, the inside-left was able to resume his football career, making one first team appearance for Swansea Town in 1960 and becoming top scorer with the reserves that season. He moved to League side Workington in 1961 where he made 50 appearances, scoring 17 times over the next two seasons, before moving on to Cambridge and then Corby. He eventually settled in Doncaster where he married a local woman and worked as a tyre fitter.

"There were never any problems as far as the English were concerned", he said. "The government found us (refugees) jobs. We were warmly received and quickly accommodated".

We were warmly received and quickly accommodated.

Background image: Tony Gallego playing for Cambridge City F.C. in 1946, Cambridge City F.C.

The Geography of Refugee Footballers in Britain

More recently British football leagues have provided opportunities for players seeking refuge from many other war torn nations.

Western Balkans

The western Balkans are predominantly those nations which were formerly the republics constituting the Federation of Yugoslavia, namely: Bosnia-Herzegovina, Croatia, Macedonia, Montenegro, Serbia and Slovenia. Serbia also had two autonomous provinces: Kosovo and Vojvodina.



In the 1980s, relations among the six republics deteriorated. Slovenia and Croatia desired greater autonomy within the Yugoslav confederation, while Serbia sought to strengthen federal authority. Facing rising nationalism amongst its various ethnic groups and in the midst of economic hardship, as the decade drew to an end Yugoslavia began to break up.

Following an increase in anti-communist opinion, Slovenia claimed independence in June 1991, leading to ten days of conflict. Meanwhile, unrest in Croatia between the Croat majority who supported independence and a significant Serb minority supported by the Serb dominated federal government led to 4 years of war in the region. It is estimated that 220,000 Croats and 300,000 Serbs were internally displaced during this period.

In April 1992 Bosnia and Herzegovina declared independence leading to the outbreak of war in June. The conflict, typified by the four year-long Sarajevo siege and Srebrenica massacre, in which 8,000 men were killed, was by far the bloodiest of the Yugoslav wars. Bosnia's Serb faction, promising independence for all Serb areas of Bosnia, instigated a process of systematic ethnic cleansing primarily against Bosnians through genocide and forced removal of Bosniak populations. It is estimated that the conflict resulted in more than 100,000 deaths and displaced over 2.2 million people, making it the most devastating conflict in Europe since the end of World War II.

In Kosovo tensions between the Serbian and Albanian communities had simmered throughout the 20th century, occasionally erupting into major violence. In 1991, the 'Kosovo Liberation Army' (KLA) was formed, supported by the majority of ethnic Albanians. Following increased Serbian oppression of Albanians in the region the KLA began attacking police stations and government offices in 1996.

The international community, while supporting greater autonomy, opposed the Kosovar Albanians' demand for independence. International pressure grew to bring an end to the escalating violence in the province. Threats of military action by the West over the crisis culminated in the launching of NATO air strikes in March 1999. The strikes focused primarily on military targets in Kosovo and Serbia but extended to a wide range of other facilities, including bridges, oil refineries, power supplies and communications. Within days of the strikes starting, tens of thousands of Kosovo Albanian refugees were pouring out of the province with accounts of killings, atrocities and forced expulsions at the hands of Serb forces.

Amongst the vast numbers of people who were forced to relocate during this period were **Mario Stanic**, **Shefki Kuqi** and **Lorik Cana**, all of whom played professional football in Britain.

Middle East



Iran

Following disputes over the control of Iranian oil distribution in the 1950s, the democratically elected Iranian government was overthrown through British and American force. This led to increasingly autocratic rule by the monarchy that crushed all forms of political opposition until the Islamic Revolution in 1979. This was partly a conservative backlash against the Westernising and secularising efforts of the Western-backed leadership and partly a liberal backlash to social injustice and other shortcomings of the ruling regime. Iraqi leader Saddam Hussein decided to take advantage of what he perceived to be disorder in the wake of the Iranian Revolution and its unpopularity with Western governments leading to the Iran-Iraq war in 1980 which lasted 8 years. Following the war, a more liberal governance was introduced with the goal of making the country more tolerant and democratic. However, presidential elections during the first decade of the 21st century have been marred by irregularities and controversy, leading to further protest.

As a result of all this turmoil, people have been seeking refuge from Iran for more than 60 years due to enduring tension between reformist and conservative factions and the nation's poor human rights record.

Kurds, in particular, have suffered a long history of discrimination in Iran. In a report released in 2008, Amnesty International said that Kurds have been a particular target of the Islamic Republic of Iran and the Kurds' "social, political and cultural rights have been repressed, as have their economic aspirations." At the beginning of the 21st century, a number of Kurdish activists, writers, and teachers have been arrested for their work and were sentenced to death. Following torture some have already been killed without being given fair hearings.

The majority of professional football players from Iranian descent in Europe play in Germany or Scandinavia. **Pedram Ardallany** and **Sharu Naraji** have played in Scotland (Partick Thistle, Arbroath) and England (Sheffield United) respectively.

Afghanistan

For more than two decades, successive wars in Afghanistan have resulted in one of the world's largest refugee crises.

In December 1979, the Soviets invaded Afghanistan and unleashed a 'wave of terror' on the civilian population as the occupying army sought to consolidate power. By 1981, 1.5 million refugees had taken refuge in neighbouring Pakistan. Those who had fled quickly organised a resistance movement known as the mujahideen (holy warriors), backed by the United States, in an effort to fight jihad' (holy war) to rid Afghanistan of Soviet infidels (non-believers). After almost ten years of war the USSR withdrew its troops from Afghanistan in 1988. Fighting continued as the mujahideen then resisted the new communist government, finally taking control in 1992. Cause for celebration was short lived, however, as mujahideen parties battling for power created a new era of conflict leading to further displacement.

This was followed by the rise and fall of the extremist Taliban government that imposed restrictive policies grounded in conservative interpretations of Islam. The period from 1994 – 2001 continued to generate more refugees as they escaped fighting or ethnic persecution at the hands of the Taliban. Between 1994 and 2005, some 238,000 Afghans had sought asylum in industrialized countries outside the region. By the end of the period, Germany was hosting 47,000 followed by the Netherlands with 26,000 and the UK with 24,000. Despite the Taliban losing power in 2001, continuing conflict means that in 2012 Afghanistan remained the fourth largest asylum applicant producing country for applications to the UK Border Agency.

As of 2012, there have been no professional footballers in Britain from Afghanistan.

Iraq

The end of the Iran-Iraq war also saw an intensification of atrocities against Kurds in Iraq, with over 100,000 deaths and the destruction of some 4,000 villages. Throughout Saddam Hussein's reign, minorities were subjected to human rights abuses and forced out of their homes for their own safety. The 1991 Gulf War caused further displacement of Iraqi peoples as did the Anglo-American invasion of Iraq in 2003. However, whilst it was estimated that one million refugees would be fleeing Iraq as a result of the invasion, six months after the fall of the Iraqi regime few Iraqis had fled their country. Three years later, though, hundreds of thousands of Iraqis fled their homes in 2006 and 2007, seeking to escape a collapse in security and deadly sectarian violence, particularly between Shi'a, Sunni and Kurdish communities.

Although estimates vary widely, about two million Iraqis fled their homes but remained in Iraq and between one and two million crossed the border into Jordan or Syria. Many others travelled much further.

Despite the huge popularity of football in Iraq and recent relative success at international level, as of 2012, no Iraqi refugees have played professional football in Britain. Whilst members of the National and Olympic sides have absconded when playing abroad to seek asylum for their own safety this was not the case when a friendly was organised with Trinidad & Tobago at an English stadium in 2004. Manchester City attempted to sign Iraqi international Nashat Akram in 2008 but he was refused a work permit due to the Iraqi national team's low FIFA ranking; a situation not helped by the fact that they were unable to play a home game in Iraq for 20 years. Akram was fortunate to have the opportunity to move abroad due to his football abilities rather than having to seek asylum.

forced to relocate were
**Mario Stanic, Shefki Kuqi
& Lorik Cana**

The Geography of Refugee Footballers in Britain

Africa

Recent years have seen many regions of Africa involved in war and internal or external conflict, from the seven or so countries directly involved in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) to the Sierra Leone crisis and the civil war in Somalia amongst others. This has resulted in over 9 million refugees and internally displaced people throughout the continent in the last decade.

Some of these refugees have found their way to Britain to play as professional footballers. **Lauren**, whose family had to flee to Cameroon from the dictatorship in Equatorial Guinea before moving to Spain when he was three, spent six years at Arsenal. His club colleague, **Christopher Wreh**, had to bribe military guards to help him leave Liberia, aged 14, when civil war broke out. Also, **Saïdo Berahino** came to Britain from Burundi via Tanzania, **Alhassan ‘Al’ Bangura** fled Sierra Leone to avoid being involved in rituals linked to the practice of witchcraft and **Lacine Cherif** escaped civil war in Ivory Coast.

Two countries from which many refugees in Britain originate are the Democratic Republic of Congo and Somalia, some extremely well known players coming from the former and potential new stars from the latter.

Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC)

The DRC, formerly known as Zaire, has for centuries suffered from conflict caused by tensions between different ethnicities within the region, particularly the settled tribes such as the Hutu and the semi-nomadic Tutsi.

Following independence from Belgian colonial rule in 1960, Joseph Mobutu seized power in 1965, administering 30 years of dictatorial leadership. Relative peace prevailed until the 1980s when political opposition to his rule increased both domestically and internationally.

This coincided with increased tension between Hutu and Tutsi in neighbouring Rwanda into which Eastern provinces of Zaire were dragged.

The culmination of this was the mass genocide in Rwanda of approximately 800,000 people over a period of 100 days in 1994, leading to the Great Lakes Refugee crisis in which more than 2 million fled the country. It is estimated that 1.5 million settled in camps across the border in Zaire.

Rebellions and counter-rebellions continued the conflict throughout the 1990s as further atrocities were committed against those living in refugee camps throughout the region.

Mobutu fled the country in 1997 under the threat of an advancing alliance of Tutsi rebels and forces from Rwanda whose initial aim was to counter the increasing security threat along the two nations’ border.

Under the new leadership the nation was ostensibly reorganised as the Democratic Republic of Congo but the new Government still had little control in the East of the country. Bloodshed continued into the new millennium with aid agencies estimating that about 5.4 million people died from violence and war-related hunger and disease between August 1998 and April 2007 and as many as 45,000 people continuing to die every month.

From this the likes of **Lomana Tresor LuaLua**, **Calvin Zola** and **Fabrice Muamba** escaped to grace English football.

Somalia

The UK is host to one of the largest and longest established Somali communities in Europe. The first Somali immigrants were seamen and merchants from the British Protectorate of Somaliland who settled in port cities in the late 19th century, mainly Cardiff, Liverpool and London. A second, small group came during the Second World War with the Royal Navy and stayed in search of employment. Most of these seamen considered their stay in the UK as temporary and had left their families behind. When the British merchant navy started to wind down in the 1950s, many of these migrants moved to industrial cities such as Birmingham, Sheffield and Manchester, where labour was in great demand.

When the British Protectorate of Somaliland and the UN-established, Italian Trusteeship Administration merged in 1960, a number of Somalis long since settled in the UK returned in support of the newly formed Republic of Somalia. However, increasing instability, particularly as a result of the ongoing Somali Civil War, has seen many return to the UK alongside numerous others seeking asylum. This last wave comprises the majority of the current Somali population in the UK.

The Somali Civil War began in 1991, when a coalition of clan-based armed opposition groups ousted the nation’s long-standing military government. The government had become increasingly totalitarian, and resistance movements sprang up across the country. Many Somalis had become disillusioned with 22 years of living under a military dictatorship.

During the period 1988 to 1994, the favoured destination of people fleeing the civil war was Scandinavia, but by 1999 53% of Somali asylum applications in Europe were made in the UK. Many of these asylum seekers had fled from neighbouring countries such as Ethiopia before migrating to the UK. Many of the refugees were not men, but women and children whose men had either been killed or had stayed in Somalia to fight, changing the Somali settlement from one of single seamen to that of refugee communities. Between 1985 and 2006, Somalis figured among the top ten largest country of origin groups of people seeking asylum in the UK. In the late 1980s, most of these early migrants were granted refugee status, while those arriving later in the 1990s more often obtained temporary status.

The passion for playing football amongst the British Somali population is, as of 2012, just starting to be reflected at the professional level with players like **Islam Feruz**, **Abdisalam Ibrahim** and **Liban Abdi** respectively breaking into the Chelsea, Manchester City and Sheffield United teams.

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Fabrice Muamba

Born – 1988 (Kinshasa, DRC)



Fabrice Muamba is a professional footballer at Bolton Wanderers and is one of England's most capped players at Under-21 level. He came to England in 1999 as a refugee, aged 11, from war-torn Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC).

Muamba's father was an adviser to the prime minister when the DRC was still known as Zaire. Because of this, his life was in danger when rebels tried to overthrow the government. His brother, Fabrice's uncle, was killed by the rebels. Friends and neighbours died too in one of the bloodiest civil wars in history. He remembers going to sleep at night amid the backdrop of gunfire. When it was safe, he and his friends would play football but, very often, they would be called back inside.

His father escaped to England in 1994 and spent several years in detention centres while his claim for asylum was being considered. In an interview for the Observer, Muamba recalls that, "He just came in to see me one morning and told me he was going out. I asked him where but he just said he had to go. I said, 'OK, see you when I see you.' I didn't realise he was going to the airport and leaving." He was eventually granted refugee status and Fabrice and his mother were able to join him in England in 1999.

Fabrice spoke no English when he arrived, making friends at school through playing football, but went on to gain A-levels as well as excelling at the sport he loved.

A defensive midfielder, he joined Arsenal in 2003 when he was 15, and was bought by Birmingham City in 2007 for £4 million. A year later, he joined Bolton for £5 million where he became a first-team regular.

He was invited to play for the DRC national team, but declined, fearing he wouldn't be safe there. He also now sees England as his adopted home country and is appreciative of how people have helped him feel a part of it. He now has British citizenship, and has represented England at every level from Under-16 to Under-21. He captained the Under-19 side and won over 30 caps for England Under-21s.

Compassion

Muamba came to many people's attention when he dramatically collapsed following a cardiac arrest during a match between Bolton Wanderers and Tottenham Hotspur in March 2012. The incredible compassion shown was highlighted by many as a great example of the football family uniting in the realisation that individual lives, regardless of their background, are more important than contrived rivalries. Such humanity, however, sometimes seems absent in attitudes towards asylum seekers who come from similar backgrounds to that of Fabrice and his family, when seeking support in the face of life threatening alternatives.

All asylum seekers deserve compassion rather than the media fuelled labels that imply their lives are less worthy of attention and are coming to Britain for an easy life. In fact they are likely to have undergone severe hardship in reaching these shores because their lives were in danger if they had remained in their own country.

Fabrice spoke no English when he arrived, making friends at school through playing football, but went on to gain A-levels as well as excelling at the sport he loved.

Images: Kick It Out

Calvin Zola

Born – 1984 (Kinshasa, DRC)

Calvin Zola-Makongo fled the war in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) with his mother in 1999 and was granted asylum in Britain.

He was signed by Newcastle, spent a season on loan to Oldham, then played for Tranmere in Division 1 for 4 seasons. Crewe then bought him and in 2011 he moved to Division 2 side Burton Albion.

In 2004, while at Tranmere, the Home Office decided he and his mother could no longer stay here, and he must stop playing football, despite the fact that the DRC was still an unsafe country. Over 2,000 fans signed a petition for him to stay and his case was supported by the Sports Minister, Richard Caborn. Zola had a work permit but had to return to Congo to apply for a visa. His application was successful and he was able to play football again.

Islam Feruz

Born – 1995 (Somalia)

Islam Feruz is an exciting young striker, currently in 2012, making his mark in the Chelsea Reserve side. Born in Somalia in 1995, he arrived in Glasgow with his family as a refugee aged 6. They were fleeing the conflict in Somalia, in which two of his grandparents had been killed. Four years later, he was signed by Celtic. In 2006, when his family was threatened with deportation, Celtic helped them to gain permanent leave to remain here.

He was good enough to be picked for Scotland Under-17s when he was just 14, and scored 6 goals in his first 7 games for them. This was made possible by a recent rule change which allowed players from overseas to represent a British nation if they had British citizenship and had been educated here for five years.

In Sep 2011 at the age of 16, he left Celtic to join Chelsea on a scholarship, a move which angered Celtic manager Neil Lennon, who felt it was disloyal after the support the Glasgow club had given Feruz and his family. The move also provoked some racist and offensive comments from a minority of Celtic fans.

He immediately broke into the reserve team at Chelsea and started scoring goals for them.



Asylum process

Most asylum seekers arrive in Britain with little forethought or understanding about what faces them when they get here.

By whatever means people travel to Britain, if they have come seeking protection they must notify the authorities of this intention as soon as possible. Not to do so may have a negative impact on their claim.

They will then have a rigorous interview, often lasting many hours, to establish their reasons for claiming asylum. This can be an extremely daunting experience for people who have fled in terror, do not speak English and are unfamiliar with the cultural norms in this country.

Decisions about the claim are made using the information provided in this interview and wider knowledge of the political and human rights situation in the country of origin. They often, though, depend on the credibility of the applicant, which may be influenced by inaccurate or inconsistent information, how long it took to claim asylum after entering the country and whether they travelled using false documents – all circumstances which may be beyond their control when fleeing from home with little or no knowledge about where they would end up. Many go through the asylum process with inadequate legal advice.

If the claim is accepted, the applicant gets refugee status lasting five years. If it is still unsafe to return at the end of this period individuals can be granted Indefinite Leave to Remain.

If the claim is refused, most asylum seekers have the right to appeal the decision. This can involve challenging the Home Office's reasons for refusal, often related to the state of mind of the claimant during the asylum interview and unacceptable assumptions made by the interviewing officer. Throughout this process new evidence can be presented, including on-going changes to the national situation in their home country and their personal circumstances since they arrived here.

Most asylum seekers do not have the kind of mass support that professional footballers have.

Most asylum seekers do not have the kind of mass support that professional footballers have.

Calvin Zola Image: Kick It Out
Islam Feruz Image: Darren Walsh, Chelsea F.C.

Liban Abdi

Born – 1988 (Burco, Somalia)

Liban Abdi is thought to have been the first Somali to become a professional footballer in England when he signed for Sheffield United in 2006.

He was born in Burco, Somalia in 1988 and moved to Norway when he was only 2 years old to escape the civil war in Somalia. His early school years were spent in Oslo but he moved to England in his teens. Abdi was recommended to Sheffield United by staff of Football Unites, Racism Divides having attended FURD's coaching sessions.

Abdi scored the winning goal on his first team debut for United in a friendly against first division Hungarian side Ferencvaros in 2008. Ferencvaros were so impressed that they soon signed Abdi on loan, in what later became a permanent move.



Shefki Kuqi

Born – 1976 (Vëcitër, Kosovo)

Shefki Kuqi is a Kosovan Albanian who grew up in Kosovo when it was part of the former Yugoslavia. When he was 12, his family moved to Finland to escape the conflict between Serbs and Kosovans.

"It was very, very hard – I'd never really heard of Finland! The first year we didn't do anything; we couldn't go to school, we couldn't go anywhere. We didn't speak the language. Then we started going to school and it was hard even then. You don't understand a word you just sit there and watch what they do".

He became a footballer in Finland with top side HJK Helsinki, and played over 60 times for Finland after gaining Finnish citizenship. He joined Stockport County in 2001 and went on to play for 10 teams in England, including Sheffield Wednesday, Ipswich and Premiership side Blackburn Rovers. The striker has scored over 100 goals in over 300 appearances. In August 2011 he joined Oldham from Newcastle.

"When you have been through what my family has been through, nothing in football gets you down", he said. "My family and my wife's family were in Kosovo when the war was going on. In my wife's village, hundreds of people were killed in a couple of minutes. She was in the middle of all that, all the dead bodies lying around the place, people she knew...kids and everything".

"If I had still been in Kosovo I would probably have been in the army. That's why I'm so lucky to have been given this opportunity. Without moving to Finland, I probably wouldn't be here now".

Transience

Most refugees seek sanctuary in neighbouring countries, often living for years in temporarily constructed refugee camps just across the border. Only a relative minority end up in Britain – often via other countries in Europe.

For those that do travel greater distances their final planned destination is often influenced by the location of already established expatriate communities, whether through historically defined colonial associations or more personal connections.

Some may have little control where they end up, having paid smugglers significant sums of money to secure their passage by whatever means possible.

Once they reach Britain and apply for asylum they are dispersed to various parts of the country and placed in accommodation that nobody else wants.

Islam Feruz image: Nemeth Miklos, www.magyarfutball.hu
Shefki Kuqi image: Kick It Out

Lacine Cherif

Lacine fled from the bloody civil war in the Ivory Coast when he was just 12. The conflict began in 2002 between the government in the south and rebel forces in the north. Thousands of civilians have been killed and many children were press ganged into joining the armed rebels. When the rebels tried to snatch Cherif to force him to join them, his father tried to protect him, and as a result was murdered in front of Cherif.

A family friend then helped to get Cherif on a plane for his own safety. He arrived in Glasgow not knowing where he was, or having any papers with him or any knowledge of English. The Refugee Council found him on their doorstep in floods of tears. They referred him to Social Services and they helped him to begin a new life in Glasgow. He went on to do voluntary work for the Red Cross.

Cherif was signed by Rangers when he was 16 after being spotted while playing for a boys' team.

Cherif lost touch with his family when he fled the country. With the help of the Red Cross tracing service, he eventually managed to find them after four years. He had a tearful reunion with them after Rangers paid for his mother, brothers and sister to come to see him.

In 2008, Cherif joined Kilmarnock, but was released a year later. His whereabouts since is somewhat of a mystery but it is believed that he may have moved to the USA to further his studies.

Children & Young People

Children and young people seeking sanctuary in Britain undergo the same asylum process as adults.

As many as 3,000 unaccompanied children come to the UK every year and claim asylum. Many more arrive with their families. Though there is a lack of clarity of exactly how many refugee and asylum seeking children and young people there are living in the UK, the Department of Health has estimated the likely figure at approximately 13,000 around half of whom are unaccompanied.

Most young refugees have experienced high levels of anxiety, had to flee from their homes, often on their own, and will have travelled through a number of countries.

Many have experienced the disappearance or imprisonment of family members or had to watch while they are raped, tortured or murdered. They may also have been severely abused themselves. Some children are former child soldiers who have escaped and travelled overseas. Some have been sent to a place of safety by their parents, or other family relations and may not be fully aware of the reasons they have left their home country. This can be problematic during the asylum interview as it can be difficult to discuss their situation in a structured way. In addition they may not want to talk to strangers about what has happened to them.

When they reach the age of 18, children must apply again to extend their leave to remain in the UK. If refused they may be treated in the same way as an adult who has been refused asylum. Refusal can mean that some young people's support is stopped and they become destitute if they do not return to their country of origin.

While many children may have a desire to return, they have little idea of what they will find or whether any family and friends remain in place. Many will have spent several years in the UK and will have built links and lives here. The prospect of returning 'home' to a country they may hardly remember can leave children feeling confused and guilty. Often, their young lives have been lived with little knowledge of their political identity as an asylum seeker and are unaware of what happens when they reach adulthood.



Alhassan 'Al' Bangura

A midfielder from Sierra Leone, Bangura made his first team debut for Watford aged 17 in 2005. He went on to captain Watford and helped them win promotion to the Premiership in 2006.

Bangura fled Sierra Leone aged 15 to avoid being forced to join the Soko secret society after his father's death. At a tribunal, he said members of the society threatened to kill him if he didn't take part in their rituals, which included mutilation. He lived on the streets in neighbouring country Guinea until a man offered to help him get to Europe. This man turned out to be a 'sex trafficker'. Bangura said he was taken to a house in London where two men tried to rape him. He escaped and found his way to the Home Office to seek asylum. He was granted permission to stay in Britain, but only until he was 18.

When he reached 18, he applied again for refugee status. His application was refused, but he was granted a work permit which allowed him to work in the UK for a limited period. This was unusual, as normally footballers only qualify for a work permit if they have played for their country, and their country is in the top 70 in the FIFA rankings.

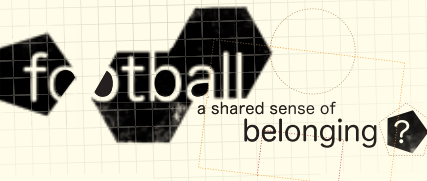
Bangura's case was helped by a huge campaign by Watford fans, the club and the local MP. Over 18,000 fans of both clubs at a Watford v Plymouth match held up posters of Bangura under the words 'he's family' and chanted his name.

In 2009, Bangura had a loan spell with Brighton, before joining Blackpool of the Championship on a free transfer. Blackpool released him in 2010, and spells playing in Turkey and Azerbaijan followed. He returned to England in 2011 to join Forest Green Rovers of the Blue Square Premier League.

Bangura has also represented Sierra Leone, making his debut against Nigeria in 2008.



Bangura image: Kick It Out



Sources:
Hek, R. (2005) The Experiences and Needs of Refugee and Asylum Seeking Children in the UK: A Literature Review. University of Birmingham
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Saido Berahino

Born – 1993 (Burundi)

Berahino grew up in Burundi, which has been the scene of ethnic violence between Tutsi and Hutu people since the 1990s. Berahino's mother fled to the UK to seek asylum, leaving Saido with his father in Burundi. When his father died in 1997 he was taken to Tanzania by a family friend. He lived there as a refugee until his mother's claim for asylum was approved in 2003. He was then able to join her in Birmingham.

The football-mad boy, who spoke only French when he arrived here, soon found a team to join and was signed by West Bromwich Albion at the age of 11. The striker went on to be part of England's Under-17 European Championship winning squad in 2010, and by 2011 had played for England Under-18s, Under-19s and Under-20s. This was only possible because of the recent change in the rules enabling foreign-born players to represent British national teams if they have a British passport and have been educated in Britain for five years.

He has been a regular in West Brom's reserve team, and in 2011-2 had successful loan spells with Northampton and Brentford.



Work

The few refugees that have made it as professional footballers in Britain are lucky that their considerable talent has been recognised and an opportunity to earn a good living is available to them.

More often, obtaining work is difficult for those who have come to Britain seeking sanctuary. Despite wanting to positively contribute to the British economy and live as normal a life as possible, asylum seekers are not allowed to work while awaiting a decision about their case. It is a situation that can take months or sometimes years. They must rely on State handouts or they risk prosecution and removal.

For refugees who have been given permission to stay in this country, finding work is also difficult. Often highly skilled in their own country, qualifications are not recognised in Britain and previous experience ignored. Many asylum seekers come from countries where there is no welfare state and they find it deeply shaming to be forced to rely on what they see as charity.

Language

The biggest obstacle facing people displaced by conflict is resurrecting some kind of normal life in a country that has different customs and where they do not speak the language.

Since 2007, free English as a Secondary Language (ESOL) classes for asylum seekers has been effectively withdrawn despite increasing demands that for 'integration' and 'citizenship' refugees should learn English and contribute to society. These cuts have clear consequences on the capacity of asylum seekers to learn English, understand British institutions, mix with other people and remain active and occupied while they await the outcome of their claim.

Many older refugees rely on their children, who may have been born in England or came when they were so young that they have grown up speaking English, to help translate when necessary.

Pedram Ardallany

Born – 1989 (Tehran, Iran)



Ardallany is a midfielder from Tehran, Iran. Born in 1989, political tensions caused him to flee Iran with his father when he was 15. He does not like to go into any more detail about what forced them to leave his mother and sister. They arrived in Britain speaking no English and were sent to live in Glasgow while their claim for asylum was being considered. Eventually, they were granted refugee status.

In Iran, Ardallany had been on the books of Iranian champions Saipa. In Scotland, he was spotted by Celtic while playing for Greenview in the Strathclyde Evangelical Churches Football League. Celtic offered him a contract, but he did not have the necessary work permit at the time. Then in 2007, after months of lobbying, he was granted a work permit by the Home Office, and signed professional terms with Partick Thistle of the Scottish First Division.

Having existed on government hand-outs for three years, father and son now consider themselves to be wealthier than the Beckhams in comparative terms. "We were not rich in Iran but we had a comfortable home and a nice way of life, so it was hard for us – financially and for our self-respect - to have to depend on benefits. Now that I have a good wage my father can go to college to learn English so that hopefully he, too, can get a job one day."

Kicking off Refugee Week in 2008, Ardallany said, "Refugees don't choose to leave their country. We are forced to do so for reasons beyond our control. Football has been a great way for me to integrate into Scottish life. It is a universal language that people speak all over the world, no matter where they are from. I admire the Scots passion for football and am grateful for the welcome they have given me here."

Saido Berahino image: West Bromwich Albion F.C.
Pedram Ardallany image: Martin Shields, Herald and Times Group.