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.

Asylum seekers are not allowed to work until they have been given permission to remain. They have to live on £35/week.

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 the country due to their appeals for asylum not being strong enough.

Sources:


75% of asylum applications are initially refused
Refugee Footballers in Britain

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 promised 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 Cowry in the 1937–38 season. Before that, he had played wartime football for Molina from 1942 and Cowry from 1943. In 1947, he returned to Spain where he had a successful career with Athletic Bilbao, Real Madrid, Barcelona and Sporting de Gijón, winning two league titles with Barcelona. He also made one appearance for Spain in the 1950s. 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 2 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 5 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 other family members already having been detained in the war. His brother, Antonio, joined him a few years later. The family settled in Cambridge where José first played football with Cambridge University side, then 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. He then moved to Rye United and an enjoyable period in a managerial role at Hastings United. After retiring, he spent 35 years as a goalkeeping 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.

Béla Oláh

Born – 1938 (Osz, Hungary)

Oláh had managed to make a name for himself as a footballer playing in Hungary’s top division by 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 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. A PA report at the time stated that he could only play professionally once he had been in the country for two years. He played for Northampton in an exciting 3–1 win over Lincoln City and was soon playing for several other Southern League clubs including five years at Hastings United and an enjoyable period in a managerial role at Ryde United.

Johnny Haasz

Born – 1937 (Budapest, Hungary)

Haasz had been a footballer in Hungary for years, but once in England, he found himself playing outfield. “This was interesting at first, but then it got a little boring. I was trying to have a job and a career, but they asked me to be a ‘dancer.’” 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 footballing career, making one first team appearance for Swindon Town in 1960 and becoming top scorer with the reserve team that season. He moved to Longdding side Wolverhampton in 1961, where he made 20 appearances, scoring 17 times over the next two seasons, before moving on to Cambridge and then Colchester where he eventually settled in Doncaster where he married a local woman and worked as a taxi driver.

“Those were some pretty problems for us in the English war years,” he said. “The government found us in refugee jails. We were warmly received and quickly accommodated.”
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 1990s, violence among the six republics determined. Slovenia claimed independence on June 25, 1991, leading to ten years of conflict. Insurmountable, unrest in Croatia between the Croats who supported independence and a significant Serb minority supported by the Serb Republic of Krajina and the Serbian president Slobodan Milosevic. It culminated in the launching of NATO air strikes in March 1999.

In April 1992 Bosnia and Herzegovina declared independence leading to the outbreak of war in June. The conflict, triggered by the Serb our of the Bosnian capital Sarajevo, and the Bosnian Serb’s intention to control all areas of Bosnia, resulted in a systematized ethnic cleansing primarily against Bosnian Muslims and Serbs. About 2 1/2 million people, including 250,000 ethnic Serbs, died in the 1992-1995 conflict.

The international community, while supporting greater independence, supported the Kosovar Albanians’ demand for independence. International pressure grew to bring an end to the resulting violence in the province. Threats of military action for the West over the crisis culminated in the launch of NATO air strikes in March 1999.

The situation in Kosovo tensions between the Albanian and Serb 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 increasing Serbian oppression of Albanians in the region the KLA began attacking police stations and government offices in 1996. The international community, while supporting greater independence, supported the Kosovar Albanians’ demand for independence. International pressure grew to bring an end to the resulting violence in the province. Threats of military action for the West over the crisis culminated in the launch of NATO air strikes in March 1999.

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The Kosovo Albanians were concerned that having won independence from Yugoslavia, they would be left isolated. The United Nations agreed to establish a presence in Kosovo in 1999. In 2008, Kosovo declared independence, prompting Serbia to recognize Kosovo.

In 2010, Croatia and Serbia were both recognized as full members of the European Union. The countries were Annex 4 countries of the EU and were also full members of the European Free Trade Association (EFTA).

Refugee Footballers in Britain

The period from 1994 – 2001 continued to generate new refugees as they escaped fighting or ethnic persecution at the hands of the Taliban. Between 1994 and 2001, some 280,000 Afghans had sought asylum in industrialized countries outside the region. By the end of the period, Germany was hosting 47,000, France 26,000, and the UK 24,000 Afghans. Despite the Taliban losing power in 2001, continuing conflict means that in 2010 Afghanistan remained the fourth largest source of asylum producing country for applications to the UK Border Agency.

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

Middle East

Following disputes over the control of oil in the 1950s, the democratically elected Iranian government was overthrown by British and American forces. The Shah was increasingly autocratic, ruling by the army. In 1979, the Islamic Revolution was led by Ayatollah Khomeini, who returned from exile and overthrew the Shah. The new government imposed Islamic law and suspended civil liberties. The economy continued to suffer from the Iran-Iraq war of 1980-1988 and the international sanctions that were imposed in 1987.

As a result of all this turmoil, people have been seeking refuge from Iran for more than 60 years due to enduring tension between rebellious 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 2001, Amnesty International said that Kurds have been a target of the Islamic Republic of Iran and the Kurdish “social, cultural and political rights have been restricted as have their economic aspirations.” At the beginning of the 21st century, a number of Kurdish clubs were formed, and players have been arrested for their work and a number were sentenced to death. Following torture some were killed without being given fair hearings.

The majority of professional football players from Iranian descent have played football in Europe, Asia, and Australia. Many have been able to play in Europe due to the economic sanctions against Iran.

Afghanistan

For more than three decades, 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 refugees as the Taliban government sought to consolidate power. By 1981, 1.5 million refugees had taken refuge in neighboring Pakistan. Those who had fled bitterly opposed to the new regime and began to move south to the border with Iran.

In 1986, the United States, under President Ronald Reagan, launched a secret war by arming and training Afghan rebels. In 1989, the Soviet Union withdrew from the region. Fighting continued as the mujahideen then formed the new government, formally taking control in 1992. Cause for celebration was short-lived, however, as Afghanistani parties battled for power in a new era of conflict leading to further displacement.

The new government, quite contrary to the wishes of the United Nations government, imposed restrictive policies grounded in conservative interpretation of Islam. The period from 1994 – 2001 continued to generate new refugees as they escaped fighting or ethnic persecution at the hands of the Taliban. Between 1994 and 2001, some 280,000 Afghans had sought asylum in industrialized countries outside the region. By the end of the period, Germany was hosting 47,000, France 26,000, and the UK 24,000 Afghans. Despite the Taliban losing power in 2001, continuing conflict means that in 2010 Afghanistan remained the fourth largest source of asylum producing country for applications to the UK Border Agency.

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Iraq

The start of the Iran-Iraq war saw an intensification of atrocities against Kurds in Iraq, with over 100,000 deaths and the destruction of some 6,000 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 but did not end the violence. In 1998, the US launched another attack on Iraq. The war, a more liberal governance was introduced with the goal of stabilizing Iraq and the U.S. air attacks in 1998.

The country has undergone a significant number of changes since the fall of the Iraqi regime in 2003. The US-led invasion in 2003 marked the end of Saddam Hussein’s regime and the start of a new era for Iraq. The country has since undergone significant changes since 2003. The US-led invasion in 2003 marked the end of Saddam Hussein’s regime and the start of a new era for Iraq. The country has since undergone significant changes since 2003. The US-led invasion in 2003 marked the end of Saddam Hussein’s regime and the start of a new era for Iraq. The country has since undergone significant changes since 2003. The US-led invasion in 2003 marked the end of Saddam Hussein’s regime and the start of a new era for Iraq. The country has since undergone significant changes since 2003. The US-led invasion in 2003 marked the end of Saddam Hussein’s regime and the start of a new era for Iraq. The country has since undergone significant changes since 2003. The US-led invasion in 2003 marked the end of Saddam Hussein’s regime and the start of a new era for Iraq. The country has since undergone significant changes since 2003. The US-led invasion in 2003 marked the end of Saddam Hussein’s regime and the start of a new era for Iraq. The country has since undergone significant changes since 2003. The US-led invasion in 2003 marked the end of Saddam Hussein’s regime and the start of a new era for Iraq. The country has since undergone significant changes since 2003. The US-led invasion in 2003 marked the end of Saddam Hussein’s regime and the start of a new era for Iraq. The country has since undergone significant changes since 2003. The US-led invasion in 2003 marked the end of Saddam Hussein’s regime and the start of a new era for Iraq. The country has since undergone significant changes since 2003.

Many of the displaced people who left Iraq in 2003 have returned, but some 2 million remain in exile. The Iraqi government has worked to help those who have returned home, but many still face challenges, including unemployment, poverty, and lack of basic services.

In 2011, the UN High Commissioner for Refugees reported that over 1.5 million people had been displaced by conflict in Iraq. This includes both people who have been forced to flee their homes and those who have returned home but continue to face challenges.

In 2012, the UNHCR estimated that there were over 12 million displaced people in Iraq, including about 3 million who had fled to neighboring countries.

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In 2022, the UNHCR reported that over 12 million people had been displaced by conflict in Iraq, including about 3 million who had fled to neighboring countries.

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The Geography of Refugee Footballers in Britain

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 gained 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 neighboring Rwanda into which Eastern provinces of Zaire were integrated. The culmination of this was the main genocide in Rwanda of approximately 500,000 people over a period of 102 days in 1994, leading to the Great Lakes refugee crisis in which more than 2 million persons fled the region, particularly the settled tribes such as the Hutu and the semi-nomadic Tutsi. Under the new leadership the nation was ostensibly reorganized as an alliance of Tutsi rebels and forces from Rwanda whose initial aim was to return to power but which later became disillusioned with 22 years of living under a military dictatorship. The government had become increasingly totalitarian, and government. The government had become increasingly totalitarian, and

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 footballers. Lebanese, who fled to Lebanon from the dictatorship in Bourj Hammoud, before moving to Spain where they were granted asylum in the 1980s. The leading English footballers are the Somali, with the likes of Lomana Tresor LuaLua, Calvin Zola and Fabrice Muamba escaped to grace English football.

Africa

The passion for playing football amongst the Somali population is, as of 2012, just starting to be reflected at the professional level with players like Adil Amsal, Abdallah Barkhook and Aliou Allal representing the immigrant communities in the United States, Canada and South Africa.
Refugee Footballers in Britain

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 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 their games would often be interrupted.

He 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 to 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-21.

Muamba came to everyone’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 good 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 ride. 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.
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 in Oldham, spent a season on loan to Oldham, then played for Tranmere in Division 1 for 4 seasons. Crewe then bought him in 2011 and he moved to Division 2 side Burton Albion.

In 2004, while a teenager, 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. The 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 goals in his first 7 games for them. The move made possible by a recent rule change which allowed players from overseas to represent a British country if they had British citizenship and had been educated in the country for five years.

In Sept 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 he should have supported the Glasgow club he 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.

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 the 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 inconsistencies or inaccuracies in what they say. The interviewing officer may also consider whether the applicant has used false documents or lied about their circumstances.

Most asylum seekers do not have the kind of mass support that professional footballers have.
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 aged 10.

Abdi was recommended to Sheffield United by staff at 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 (Vćitrn, Kosovo)

Shefki Kuqi is a Kosovar 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 Kosovars.

“...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 12 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.

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“When you have been through what my family has been through, nothing a football gift you don’t think,” he said. “My family and my entire family were in Kosovo when the war was going on. 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 the houses – kids and everyone.”

“If I had still been in Kosovo I probably would 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.
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.

Children & Young People

As many as 1,500 unaccompanied children come to the UK every year and claim asylum. Many more come with their families. Though there is a lack of clarity of exactly how many refugees and asylum seeking children and young people there are living in the UK, the Department of Health has estimated the likely figure at approximately 12,000 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 lost contact with family members who have escaped and travelled overseas. Some have been sent to a place of safety by their parents, or other family members 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 16, children must apply again to extend their leave to remain in the UK or face a return to their country of origin. Many 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.

While many children may have a desire to return, they have little idea of what it would be like to return, which family members are still alive and where they are. They may not have a clear idea of what will happen if they return or how this may affect their personal safety.

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. Watford aged 17 in 2005. He went on to captain Watford and helped them win promotion to the Premiership in 2006.

Bangura Real Sierra Leone aged 15 is avoid being forced to join the Zoko secret society after his father’s death. As a result, he said members of the society threatened to kill him if he didn’t take part in their rituals, which included, exorcism. He fled the streets in his home country before a rival offered to help him get to Europe. The rival turned out to be a ‘sex trafficker’. Bangura said he was later 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. He was amongst a group of footballers in his age group when his application was refused.

Bangura’s case was helped by a huge campaign by Watford fans, the club and the local MP. Over 16,000 fans of both clubs at a Watford v Plymouth match held up posters of Bangura under the words ‘he’s family’ and shown 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 2013, and spells playing in Turkey and Azerbaijan followed. He returned to England in 2015 to join Forest Green Rovers of the Blue Square Premier League.

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

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 elder brother to be part of England’s Under-17 European Championship winning squad in 2010, and by 2011 he had played for England Under-15s, Under-16s and Under-20s. The was only possible because of the recent change to UK asylum laws, which under the 2004 Immigration Act people who are granted asylum can now bring their immediate family to the UK. They have been 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.

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 claims for asylum were 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 waited on government handouts for three years, father and son 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, but now we are – financially and for our self-respect - we have to depend on benefits. How rare! 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.”

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 citizens as possible, asylum seekers are still unable to work and therefore are unable to provide financially for themselves or support their families. Often they have to rely on State handouts or they risk prosecution and removal.

For refugees who have been given permission to stay in the 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 fear coming forward about their work experience or education.

Language

The biggest obstacle facing people displaced by conflict is reuniting 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 Second Language (ESOL) classes for asylum seekers has been offered only reluctantly despite increasing demands that both ‘integration’ and ‘assimilation’ 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 while they await the outcome of their claim.

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