

Russian family commits suicide after being denied asylum in UK

Written by Steve James

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Neighbours heard screams as Sergei Serykh, his wife Tatiana and their 21-year-old son fell from the 15th floor of a Glasgow tower block at 8:45 a.m. last Sunday morning. Their bodies hit the ground, alongside a wardrobe they used to break through netting on the landing from which they jumped. All three were killed instantly.

The family had recently been told by the UK Borders Agency (UKBA) their asylum claim had been rejected. They had been asked to leave their high rise accommodation in the city's Red Road flats. Facing deportation or, at the very least, destitution consequent to failure to make it through the UK's asylum machinery, the family concluded that their situation was beyond hope.

The deaths elicited a display of public sympathy. A vigil was held at the foot of the tower block in the city's Springburn district, attended by over 100 people including local residents, current and former asylum seekers and civil rights campaigners. Among those attending was ten-year-old Precious Mhango. Precious and her mother Florence have recently won the right to a judicial review of the UKBA's decision to deport them to Malawi.

One man attending the vigil told the BBC, "We feel afraid from the Home Office. Everybody is afraid. Today all asylum seekers are here to pay tribute to the three people who died. Everybody is worried about their own situations as well. If I go back to Pakistan I will be killed."

A protest was also held outside the Glasgow offices of the UKBA in Govan. A further protest march and rally is intended today. The protest will demand the release from Yarl's Wood detention centre of Nigerian twins Joshua and Joel Ovrana, and their mother, Stephanie, who have been living in the Cranhill area of Glasgow for the last five years.

Spokesperson Robina Qureshi, for the rights organisation Positive Action for Housing, called for a public enquiry into the circumstances around the Red Road deaths. "We want to know what role the UKBA played," Qureshi said. "In particular, we want to know: did the UKBA recently communicate with the three victims over their asylum case? Were officials knocking at

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the door of the three suicide victims at 63 Petershill Drive, Springburn on Sunday morning when the suicides took place?”

The tragedy highlights the terrible circumstances faced by asylum seekers in the UK. From their first arrival asylum seekers, should they manage to correctly register their appeal at an airport, seaport or police station, face an uphill battle against deportation. They will first be sent to one of several dispersal sites around the UK. Red Road in Glasgow is one such location. Cheaply built in the 1960s, the site consists of 30 storey flats which are now half empty and due to be pulled down. The local area has few amenities and the flats are very basic.

Over the following months and years asylum claimants, fleeing all manner of social calamities will be interviewed by the UKBA. On the basis of this interview they will either be awarded refugee status, given discretionary leave to remain or humanitarian protection. Fully 70 percent are rejected immediately. Of the 30 percent accepted only 20 percent of these?just six percent of the total?are accepted as refugees. There is an appeal tribunal, which upholds only 25 percent of cases presented to it. Further appeals can only be made with legal assistance through the Court of Session or Supreme Court.

After an application is rejected, the Home Office suspends such minimal financial assistance as is available, usually within 21 days. A removal order is then issued. Thereafter UKBA's Borders Police are likely to seize people without notice, often at dawn, and incarcerate them in Dungavel or Yarl's Wood detention centre pending deportation.

Many destitute failed asylum seekers are reduced to begging and sleeping on friends' floors. People facing deportation are reported to prefer sleeping on stairs in the Red Road flats, rather than risk a visit from the Borders Police.

Suicides among those caught in this terrifying situation are not uncommon. According to the National Coalition of Anti-Deportation Campaigns, at least 55 asylum seekers have taken their own lives since 2000. In Glasgow in 2006, Zamira Sadigova jumped out of an 11th floor flat. She was killed as police were breaking down the door to section her under the Mental Health Act. The following year, also in Glasgow, Uddav Bhandari, from Nepal, doused himself in petrol and set himself alight in the offices of the Immigration Tribunal. He died shortly after.

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In contrast to the shock and outpouring of sympathy for the Serykh family and the thousands of people caught in similar circumstances?there are 5,000 asylum seekers living in Glasgow alone?the political and media response has been cynical.

Glasgow Labour MP Tom Harris aggressively defended Labour's policy. "If we are going to have an asylum system that actually works we have to have one where people's situation is fully considered and a final decision made on the facts," he said. "You can't make that judgment a hostage on the basis of threats by the individuals to take their own lives."

The Labour Party has also sought to distance the Serykh case from the British government policy which killed them. Local MP Willie Bain, who had been visited by Sergei Serykh shortly before his death insisted, following a meeting with Gordon Brown, "The Prime Minister agreed with me that this case appears to be exceptional, and should not be viewed as emblematic of the asylum system as a whole."

A similar line was taken by Melanie Reid, a Times columnist. Reid described Sergei and his family as "members of the vast tribe of lost souls who swirl around the world, their past unverifiable, their present precarious, their future uncertain."

But she insisted, "In asylum policy emotion must never replace hard facts. Britain cannot be the world's social worker, and we must acknowledge that some people in this twilight world are beyond help and that their deaths should not lie on our conscience."