

Voices

## *If you want to know the reality of being a refugee, read these claims from Britain's current asylum seekers*

Joseph first saw a dead body when he found his father's decapitated corpse. Pamela was removed by immigration officers as she got out the shower. Mohammed was threatened by the Taliban after working as an interpreter for the British in Afghanistan. Umar is a gay man who faces persecution in his home country

Patrick Page | Thursday 22 June 2017 12:15 BST |  8 comments



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### Joseph

Joseph had never before seen a dead body when, as a teenager, he saw his father's decapitated corpse strewn among others on the street, a victim of intertribal violence. Of his family, only he and his mother survived, rescued by a member of the rival tribe who hid them in his house.

When the killing stopped, Joseph and his mother returned home. After finishing school, Joseph went to work for a newspaper known for its fearless criticism of the government. The authorities responded by harassing the journalists and eventually banning the paper.

Joseph and his colleagues were forced to flee to a neighbouring country but he was pursued by operatives from his home country. They kidnapped and detained him before torturing him physically and psychologically for several months in order to gain information on his sources.

When Joseph's tormentors placed a knife and a gun on a table in front of him, and asked him to choose the instrument of his death, Joseph's response came naturally: "There is no choice to make, I'm already dead."

## In pictures: A day of refugee rescues in the Mediterranean Sea



Joseph was eventually released but he couldn't ignore the call to write and he was soon back in the city, exposing state corruption, being detained and tortured on a number of occasions as a consequence.

Several years ago, when Joseph was in the UK to cover an international sports event, he was informed by a friend at home that the security forces had been to his house and were asking when he would return. Terrified, Joseph sought refuge in the UK.

After claiming asylum, Joseph was locked up for several months in detention centres pending a decision on his claim. Unsurprisingly, this reignited raw memories of his previous torture.

Despite his treatment at the hands of the Home Office, Joseph bears no grudge against the UK. He now lives with a British man who he thinks of as a father and his neighbours are friendly. Joseph even feels sorry for the Home Office "caseowner" who initially refused his asylum claim: "The caseowners have a hard job – they send someone back so they kill the life for someone –and they know this. The system is just to reduce people, but it should not be about numbers, it's about human rights."

### **Pamela**

Pamela had just had a shower and was still in her underwear when the immigration officers came into her room in order to remove her from the UK. She refused to be taken to the airport, as she still had an outstanding application for leave to remain in the UK.

One female officer grabbed her head and neck, Pamela told us, pushing them down towards her chest, blocking her windpipe. "I was filled with fear and tried to get out of her grip. I kept telling her 'I cannot breathe' but she continued to push. Eventually I stopped trying to get out of her grip and fell to the floor."

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The officers could not remove Pamela that day, so she was escorted instead to the Kingfisher Isolation Unit where, at the notorious women’s-only detention centre Yarl’s Wood IRC, asylum-seekers like Pamela are put away in isolation, alone with their demons.

The damaging psychological effects of isolation, including anxiety, hallucinations and suicidal thoughts even after short periods, are well-documented. Nelson Mandela described the punishment as the “most forbidding” of his experiences on Robben Island. “There is only one’s mind, which can begin to play tricks... one begins to question everything.”

Pamela, a victim of torture and sexual abuse, has sought refuge in the UK because she fears persecution as a lesbian in her home country in East Africa, where homosexuality is a crime and gay men and women are vulnerable to acts of violence.

Though she has now been released, Pamela is arguing in the High Court, for the first time, that a lack of Home Office guidance has resulted in the use of isolation by detention centre staff in an arbitrary and unlawful way. She doesn’t want others to go through the same ordeal. The system, as Pamela puts it, “amplifies vulnerability and breaks one’s spirit”.

## **Mohammad Azim**

When Mohammad received a call from the Taliban one calm spring afternoon, his life turned upside down. They told him they knew he was an interpreter for the Nato-led forces in Afghanistan, so he should either cooperate by passing over information or they would kill him and his family.

Mohammad cut the call and threw away his SIM card, but he knew his life had changed forever. He was now a target.



What is Refugee Week?

Mohammad was aware of the risks in being an interpreter. His patrol regularly came under fire and he had seen soldiers blown to pieces by Improvised Explosive Devices (IEDs). He also knew that he could be pursued by the Taliban and either tortured or killed as one of “the infidel’s translators”.

“We used to have the body parts of captured interpreters sent to our base – hands, feet, fingers, toes,” describes a former US Army Captain. “A warning to our interpreters about colluding with Americans.”

Mohammad signed up nevertheless. “I believed the cause was very important: to defeat the Taliban and restore order. I also knew that my assistance was vital in stopping a lot of innocent people being killed.”

After seven years in this work, when the threats to his family became unbearable, Mohammad was forced to flee Afghanistan, seeking refuge in the UK.

While he waited for a decision on his asylum claim, Mohammad was locked up for several months in a detention centre under the shadow of Heathrow Airport, a noisy reminder of the Home Office’s intention to send him back. In detention, Mohammad’s already poor mental health deteriorated dramatically.

Mohammad was eventually released, and has now been granted asylum. He has a message for the Home Office: “I really appreciate the help I have received in this country, but please don’t ignore asylum seekers. Interpreters like me helped you, so you should help us. We’re not extremists, we’re not criminals, we’re just people who had to flee our homes. If you’d been through what we went through, you would give us asylum straight away, but I wouldn’t want you to suffer like we did. You’re my family now.”

## Umar

Umar first came out locked up in a detention centre, to a male immigration officer. “He wore a suit and had a badge. I felt scared because I didn’t know if what I said would be kept secret. But I had no choice. I was very nervous as this was the first time I had told anyone that I was gay.”

Umar was being questioned by this immigration officer about his asylum claim. He seeks refuge in the UK on the basis that he would face persecution as a gay man were he to be returned to Pakistan, where homosexuality is criminalised and gay men and women are subjected to emotional, physical and sexual violence. To make matters worse, Umar is more likely to be persecuted than protected by the state or his family. “I know that if my family or community harmed me because I am gay, I would have nowhere to turn.”

Italian coastguard rescues refugee boat from Libya in the Mediterranean

Umar’s emotional struggle in coming out for the first time was compounded by shame and fear. Shame, stemming from an understanding of sexuality shaped by his traditional upbringing, such that he felt “less of a man”. He feared that others in the detention centre would find out: “It would spread like forest fire... I feared that they would hurt me.”

With nobody he could speak to in detention, Umar struggled to sleep and his depression took a downward spiral.

Though Umar is no longer in detention, he has brought a challenge in the High Court, arguing that Home Office policy and practice with regards to the detention of LGBTI asylum-seekers is unlawful and in violation of fundamental human rights. “I do not want any refugee, especially a LGBTI refugee, to go through this. Being in detention I was always scared, it was a prison also for my brain and my heart.”

*The people whose stories are compiled here are clients of Duncan Lewis Solicitors. Patrick Page is an immigration and asylum caseworker at Duncan Lewis Solicitors, the biggest supplier of legal aid in the UK*

*Save for Mohammad Azim, who has been granted asylum and wanted to use his real name, they are telling their stories under pseudonyms. Joseph, Pamela and Umar are still waiting to be given refuge in the UK* ●

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