



Liberal Democrats for Seekers of Sanctuary

23 Lincoln Road, Hindley, Wigan. WN2 3QY

johnskipworth038@btinternet.com (correspondence)

info@ld4sos.org.uk

www.ld4sos.org.uk

facebook.com/ld4sos

twitter.com/ld4sos

President Lord Roger Roberts of Llandudno

HUMANITARIAN VISAS: A MUCH NEEDED LIFE-LINE FOR REFUGEES

‘Everyone has the right to seek and enjoy in other countries freedom from persecution’, says Article 14 of the [Universal Declaration on Human Rights](#). There is no such thing as an illegal asylum-seeker: only asylum seekers lacking legal routes to safety. But how CAN you get safely and legally to other countries? Well, if you are British, your passport gives you visa-free access on arrival to 132 countries, and nearly all others will grant you a visa on application. The same is not true if you are [Afghani, Iraqi, Iranian, or Syrian](#).

In the year to March 2020, [35,000 people applied for asylum in the UK](#): virtually all of them had to enter irregularly – smuggled in lorries, crossing the channel in small boats, or using forged documentation to obtain visas. Ask yourself: why would a Darfuri escaping war-torn Sudan have to forge their passport to get on a plane from Khartoum to London? Why would an Eritrean in Calais pay thousands of pounds to malevolent traffickers, risking their lives by travelling in unseaworthy boats to reunite with their family in the UK, rather than board a Eurostar for £50? The answer is clear: if either of them attempted to use their national documents, they will be denied boarding.

Since March 2020, the UK’s resettlement programme has been halted: its renewal, as well as committing to accommodate unaccompanied refugee children from camps in Europe, are important steps for addressing the predicament of vulnerable persons who have already fled but on their own they are in order to tackle head-on the *root* cause of dangerous and illegal routes to asylum, which is the absence of safe and legal ones.

[Less than 1 percent of the world’s refugees are resettled](#). Most refugees are forced to risk their life and limb on perilous journeys, enduring extensive human rights violations on the way, to claim their human right to asylum. Many of those who made it to Calais had gone to dangerous lengths to reach adequate safety, running from Turkish border guards with a shoot to kill policy, walking the channel tunnel for 30 miles avoiding the speeding trains, suffering abuse and violence from police and border officials, cramming onto small unsafe dinghies to cross the channel, and losing their loved ones on the way, all to try and find safety.

On top of this, at present, governments across the ‘global north’ are not only failing to help these refugees in their journeys, but are actively making the situation worse by using numerous practices, including building razor wire fences, walls, detention centres, funding riot police, and forcibly containing refugees in dangerous regions, all to try and deter and prevent refugees from arriving and to push them back. These practices make refugees’ journeys even more difficult and more dangerous.

And in the UK, liberal internationalists are currently fighting an uphill battle against a Government that is adamant to deny protection even for those who reach our shores after desperate unsafe journeys: it is planning to set up [offshore detention centres in Gibraltar or the Isle of Man](#) and to render inadmissible applications by those who passed through so-called ‘first safe countries’.

The UK government [houses asylum-seekers in abominable conditions](#), and in the year marking the [70th anniversary of the 1951 refugee convention](#), seem intent on breaching the UK's refugee and human rights obligations.

What if, instead of this nightmarish situation which we describe above, seekers of sanctuary could approach a UK consulate in their country of origin, in neighbouring countries, or a border post at a channel crossing, and apply for a *Humanitarian Visa* which would enable them to come to the UK safely and legally, where their asylum application would be fully assessed?

Humanitarian Visas would provide nothing less than a lifeline for refugees, enabling them to safely and legally travel to the UK, and get the protection they deserve, avoiding dangerous journeys, exploitative traffickers, human rights violations, and ultimately needless and avoidable loss of life. For refugees, these visas are required to uphold the fundamental principle to seek and claim asylum.

LD4SOS Council members, Dr Ruvi Ziegler, Associate Professor in International Refugee Law, University of Reading and Dr Bradley Hiller-Smith, PhD in The Ethics of State Responses to Refugees, University of Reading, were instrumental in ensuring that at their Spring Conference on 21st March 2021, the Liberal Democrats became the first UK party to [adopt a policy motion](#) calling for **the creation of pathways for refugees in the form of humanitarian visa applications, as a vital component of a comprehensive policy for 'safe and legal routes to save lives'**.

It is high time for other UK parties and for liberally minded parties across the 'global north' to follow suit, to provide an essential lifeline for refugees in the 21st century.