

PHOTOGRAPHY

# A touch of patience

The everyday sorrows and joys of refugees struggling to make their lives in the North East are documented in a new book by photographer Damien Wootten, as Tamzin Lewis discovers

Shaliq and his baby brother Zaid are two of the lucky ones. Their dad survived a massacre during the civil war in Sri Lanka and escaped to France where he lived alone for seven years.

The boys and their mum Shuhana eventually found safe passage to be with him again and now they have settled in Cowgate where they wait to hear if they can stay in Newcastle.

Photographer Damien Wootten, whose new book is Northern Refuge, says: "They would much rather be in their homeland, but they are terrified of being sent back. It's really upsetting and I have learnt a lot about some of the world's harshest regimes through working on this project. I have also become more informed about combating prejudices."

Other asylum seekers in the North are here after losing everything through oppression or persecution in countries such as Eritrea, China, Afghanistan, Rwanda, Sierra Leone and Zimbabwe.

One refugee says: "I came out of the camp - a prison camp, a camp of death - and I found safety here in the North. How did I know it was safety? A smile, a touch of patience, a glass of water offered."

Another Iraqi refugee says: "They sent the girls with Down's Syndrome into the pet markets in the city to see the animals. They strapped rucksacks with

explosives to their backs and detonated them. They died and many others."

And a doctor from Bahrain says: "When the uprising began I treated the rebels who were brought to me. The soldiers ripped my scarf from my face as they raped me. I was in prison for a long time."

These testimonies were collected by Martyn Hudson, a manager at the North of England Refugee Service, who commissioned the photography project.

Damien, of Low Fell, Gateshead, says: "With the photos I wanted to help create awareness and a bit of debate. A lot of the press about asylum is so negative and you don't have to scratch the surface very far to find some very intolerant views. A lot of asylum seekers are homeless or sleeping on people's floors, so the stories about them getting loads of benefits are just not true. Much of the time asylum seekers don't want to be here, they want to be at home, but it's impossible for them."

His photos give insight into lives usually unseen, of people waiting hours for help with the Kafkaesque mountains of paperwork they are faced with in connection with housing issues and asylum claims.

Damien, who took pictures at the drop-in centre at Newcastle's Bigg Market, says: "Some of the pictures are quite depressing, but there are good news

stories of families settling and establishing themselves with a right to stay.

"I've tried to make it quite personal. People can be quite judgemental about asylum seekers, but when they are confronted with a picture of a woman and a baby who have lost their claim to stay they can perhaps relate better to their story."

The photographs are accompanied by an essay by Martyn, who previously taught philosophy and third world studies at university.

He writes: "This is where we find ourselves: those born in the farms above Tow Law and those born on the farmsteads of Zimbabwe. Those raised in the shadow of the Baltic mill at Gateshead and those whose earliest memories are walking down the grand avenues of Tehran. Our origins are one thing - separate, distant, strange. Our futures are another - together, close, comfortable."

*Northern Refuge, published by the North East Photography Network (NEPN) and funded by the North of England Refugee Service, is launched on May 18. The launch takes place at the NEPN Symposium on Socially Engaged Practice at the Mining Institute and Lit & Phil Library in Newcastle. For more information visit [www.northeastphoto.net](http://www.northeastphoto.net)*



Main picture, Shaliq holding his brother Zaid and, above, their mum Shuhana. Bottom left, Sebatu from Sierra Leone. Far left, an Afghan waits

