

# one Planet



## LEEDS WINTER 2012

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# one PLANET LEEDS WINTER 2012

Welcome to ONE PLANET LEEDS MAGAZINE and our third issue of the year WINTER 2012. The magazine aims to work in partnership to support refugees and asylum seekers in Leeds. ONE PLANET Leeds is developed alongside Press Gang. Press Gang is an organization that works with exiled journalist and activists to encourage positive representation of asylum and refugee issues in the media.

Find out more at:

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Special thanks to all that have been involved in writing or helping with this edition; thanks to everybody at LASSN and Press Gang members past and present.

With contributions from; Adam Jones, John Obiechina, LASSN, Lora Evans, Lizzie Scourfield, PAFRAS, Peter Richardson, Steve McVeagh, The Manuel Bravo Project.

Designed by Ben Frew

Printed by Printshop Leeds, HMP

Edited by Jessica Duncan

If you would like to contribute to the next Summer Issue or the Press Gang online Blog, please get in contact by emailing [pressgangleeds@hotmail.com](mailto:pressgangleeds@hotmail.com) or contacting the Editor on 07882 731754

To advertise in this newsletter, please contact Richie on 0113 3731759 or email [richie@lassn.org.uk](mailto:richie@lassn.org.uk)



## LEEDS ASYLUM SEEKERS' SUPPORT NETWORK

Are you interesting in a career in teaching and want some unique experience?

Are you looking to do some volunteer work that is beneficial and rewarding?

Then LASSN and the English at Home project wants to hear from you.

'This is definitely the most rewarding thing I've done for a long time' – A new English at Home volunteer, describes his experience of teaching an isolated refugee.

English at Home provides not just improved English but also empowerment, freedom, reduced isolation, and a sense of pride for all of our highly motivated students. Many of our students would love to go to college classes but are unable to due to childcare, health problems and other barriers. As a result, English at Home provides a rewarding, satisfying, often eye-opening and always enjoyable experience for our volunteer teachers.

As a volunteer with us you will receive comprehensive training and full support. Lessons can be as formal or informal as you like and take place once a week, for an hour, in the student's home.

If you are interesting in volunteering please call Catherine on 0113373 1759 or e-mail [catherine@lassn.org.uk](mailto:catherine@lassn.org.uk)

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I am a Chartered Accountant, hold the Diploma in Charity Accounting and have many years experience of working alongside and supporting the voluntary sector.

I enjoy working with people who are passionate about what they do. My aim is to provide a high quality, client focused, cost effective service. I am not VAT registered so there is no VAT on top of my fees. Click Here for more information.



# AGENCY UPDATES



The Manuel Bravo Project is a charitable organisation which helps asylum seekers who are unable to find adequate legal representation. The Project is coordinated by a small team of paid staff, and our services are implemented by barristers, immigration specialists, solicitors, case workers, law students and other individuals who volunteer their time. We seek to complement our legal advice by referral to, and working with, other organisations serving asylum seekers.

We prioritise appeals but will deal with fresh claims when capacity allows. For more information on how referrals work please visit [www.manuelbravo.org.uk](http://www.manuelbravo.org.uk) or call us on 0113 350 8608.



**[www.pafras.org.uk](http://www.pafras.org.uk)**

PAFRAS is a local organization that works with asylum seekers, refugees and people in the local communities in Leeds and the surrounding area.

The UK asylum system is adversarial and unjust. Asylum seekers fleeing persecution face a culture of disbelief in the Home Office and a legal aid system that strongly disincentives lawyers from continuing to represent them to appeal. More than 25% of asylum cases are won at appeal, but many more are lost for want of legal advice.

Once refused, asylum seekers are deliberately made destitute as a means to make them leave the country. Fearful of returning home many remain destitute on the streets of Britain for years.

PAFRAS' aim is to work in a spirit of solidarity with asylum seekers and refugees. PAFRAS promotes social justice through direct assistance, individual casework, mental health support, research and campaigning.

PAFRAS's vision is to end destitution, creating a just society.

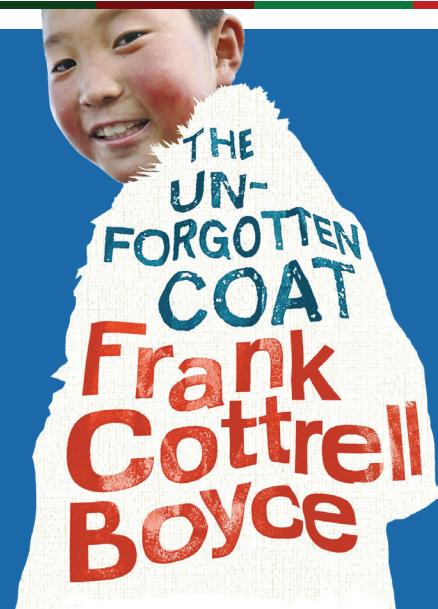


Organisation for  
Conflict Resolution and Reconciliation

**[www.ocrr.org](http://www.ocrr.org)**  
**01133 731757**

The OCRR is a local non-governmental organisation, which settles disputes by peaceful means and unites parties for sustainable peaceful coexistence. Our vision is to promote out of court settlements of disputes and minor crimes. We aim to reduce the level of criminalization of offenders of petty crimes by addressing their root causes through education and counselling.





## BOOK REVIEWS

by  
**Peter Richardson**



### Refugees, Capitalism and the British State Tom Vickers

Tom Vickers' book is academic and therefore expensively out of the reach of most readers, but it includes important lessons we need to hear. I must admit I started by glancing at the contents and then jumping to the conclusions. I am an activist rather than an academic so I wanted to know what the implications were and what I needed to do about them.

My first thought was that perhaps I needed to read the rest of the book. The book comments about refugees' experience of

The Unforgotten Coat by Frank Cottrell Boyce is a fantastically simple read that does not dwell on the difficulties or horrors of asylum seekers.

It is not obvious in the story that the novels characters, Chingis and his brother Nergui, are asylum seekers. They arrive in Julie's school in Liverpool bringing their own Mongolian culture with them. Julie is told that she is to be their "good guide", and starts learning what she can about Mongolia. The brothers also start to learn about the culture of Liverpool and it is not long before they develop a Liverpool accent and discover a fascination with football.

At one point, Chingis talks about vanishing and how so many of the people they knew in Mongolia had vanished.

volunteering, and how this has not always resulted in beneficial outcomes. Tom also highlights the impact of meeting immediate needs, and how this predicates against working on long-term changes. I feel we certainly see that in our work with Leeds Refugee Forum. Understandably, it is difficult to be concerned about policy and strategy when you do not know where you are going to sleep, or where your next meal is coming from.

Tom goes on to suggest that refugee support agencies and practitioners, like ourselves, need to connect refugee causes with other oppressed groups to decrease isolation and increase available resources. I would also say that this could help to reduce prejudice against asylum seekers.

This is all too often the experience for many asylum seekers who have seen family and friends disappear in their own country.

Frank Cottrell Boyce's book was inspired by a true story of a girl who came to the UK and was an inspiration to those around her. But one day she too vanished, as she was picked up by immigration officials and removed back to her country of origin. However, as a children's book The Unforgotten Coat focuses on the cross cultural interactions, with only light touches and hints at the darkness underneath.

This book won the 2012 Guardian Children's Fiction Prize, and I would say it is a great read for any child from the age of eight onwards.

I have struggled to read the rest of the book; however I am still looking at particular chapters. It comes from a Marxist perspective that I have little experience of. I found myself watching a television programme about Karl Marx as an economist in order to try and understand some of the concepts behind the early chapters of this book.

It may be a difficult read but I believe sometimes we need to stretch our thinking and consider how we work. It poses questions as to whether organizations like ours are helping asylum seekers and refugees to change the world, or only helping them to cope with being oppressed.



His dream has been to witness the shores of Europe and experience the life he envies. Like a joke, Okwudili saves for three years in addition to the money he realizes from the sales of his property. Although the money is too meagre considering the exorbitant nature of embarking on a comfortable journey, he is unperturbed. His life depends so much on reaching his dreamland. On the other hand, the dream of his family depends on Okwudili's success in realizing his own dream.

Bearing the burden of his dream, Okwy as he is fondly called by his friends embarks on a long and assiduous journey with six of his friends who shared similar hopes. Since the itinerary of the journey is known to them; they already know the challenges ahead, the risk involved and the price to pay. Yet they embark on the journey more determined and optimistic. Their only consolation is the reward at the end.

Departing West Africa enroute to Morocco coursing through the popular Sahara Desert is their first great challenge. Adapting through the capricious climatic condition of the desert is something nobody who loves his life would dare to try. Despite this awareness, they soar undauntedly trekking through the hot sandy dessert. At nights, they cluster and cling together to share each other's warmth under a thick blanket. During this first hurdle for life, they reassure themselves that they would hold on to themselves. They believe that their sufferings are transient and are worth paying for in comparison with the reward at the end.

At the end of the journey through the desert, three out of the seven adventurers died and are quickly buried within the sands. Okwy is lucky. He is amongst

## JOURNEY to their HOMELAND By John Obiechina

the living four. The death of the three is a big blow. Although they knew the risks involved but they never believed that lives are involved.

Navigating through Morocco without being caught from illegal entrance is another trial. They disguise themselves in different forms just to avoid being noticed by either the immigration officers or suspecting Moroccans. Fortunately, they are able to break all immigration protocols and finally find themselves at the shores. Overcoming this second task calls for a celebration because they have just the last hurdle of crossing the sea and then their dreams will come true. In joyful celebration, one of them volunteered to sneak back into the nearby town to buy some drinks and foods to adequately mark their triumph. In the process, he is caught and handed to the police whom after thorough investigation is jailed probably for life because no one would be there for him.

After waiting in frustration for the arrival of their partner, Okwy and the two others decide to end his memories with his disappearance. Pulling together all their resources is enough to purchase

a flying boat. With this flying boat, the three started the last ultimate voyage to their dreamland. At first the waves seem calm and obedient. As time goes, the gentle breeze gradually metamorphoses to a whirlwind wobbling the boat from east to west in a fierce manner. This unwelcoming turbulence wrapped the hearts of the trio. They are not too far from reaching their destination yet the wind and the violent waves are now their greatest enemy.

They manage to pull together, holding on as strong as they can. Unfortunately, one of them is lost into the deep oceans away from his dream. At the calmness of the sea, Okwy and his friend find themselves in a land away from their destination. Now they yell sending a distress call to the world to come to their aid and enable them complete their long journey to their dream world and find peace, joy and home there.

Millions of people are displaced through violence and conflicts around the world. While some escape from persecution, others voluntarily migrate in search of a better life. Whether as refugees or asylum seekers, they face many challenges. Amongst them is finding a home and friendship in their host countries. But is this need adequately met? What could be done to ensure a more peaceful and prosperous world devoid of rancour and violence? How can the leaders be held accountable for their decisions and actions in perpetuating crimes, and wars? The sure path to world's progress is by providing honest answers to these questions.

# WELFARE REFORM

It is no secret that the current coalition government have made a great number of cuts, some unpopular and some extremely so – such as the 11% cut to the education budget. However, one series of cuts that seem to actually receive support from the general public are the welfare reforms being brought about by the Department of Work and Pensions, headed by Iain Duncan Smith. Much of their popularity owes undoubtedly to the success of the ‘scrounger’ discourse, adopted by politicians and media outlets alike, one which refugee and immigrant families are all too familiar with. The idea that welfare recipients, and in particular refugees, are feckless and idle seems to be ingrained in the minds of many in our society. All it takes is a closer examination of these issues to realise that not only is this dehumanising discourse unfair, but so are the policies that have been and are being enacted.



Contrary to popular belief, the necessity for cuts came about not so much through the excessive spending of the previous government, but through a global economic crash rooted in over-confident American lenders. In that context, it seems rather unfair that benefit recipients should be punished in the aftermath. Rising living costs and increased unemployment have left the most vulnerable in society suffering greatly. For some refugees, this does not even represent much of a change. Under Tony Blair's Labour government, regulations were brought in to penalise employers who hired anyone without the correct documentation. This left a great number of asylum seekers, especially recent arrivals, unjustifiably persecuted by over-cautious employers. This legislative pattern spread to welfare policy, with a long list of entitlements restricted for non-citizens. The impact of these policies, coupled with the cultural barriers they face, undoubtedly left refugees and asylum seekers at a far greater risk of poverty. The results of this can be seen all over the UK. This is why it is so troubling that the latest batch of welfare reforms will again attack the neediest and, again, disproportionately affect refugees and asylum seekers.

One of the changes that come into force next year is the replacement of Council Tax Benefit, used to cover the Council Tax costs of those living on benefits, with Council Tax Support. This represents a cut – the overall expenditure will be reduced by 10% – but the specifics of this change give it the potential to be particularly damaging. Firstly, the spending is now at the discretion of Local Authorities rather than central government.

# what does it mean?

This leaves the potential for people in some parts of the country to be treated differently based solely on where they live – there is evidence to suggest that certain Local Authorities are all too happy to under-deliver benefits to refugees. Secondly, pensioners are protected from the reduction, meaning that the brunt born by working-age people is significantly higher than the 10% reduction. In Leeds, the Council have said the drop could be as high as 30%. Many people, especially refugees on JSA and Housing Benefit, will have never paid council tax before and may suddenly be faced with a sharp downturn in their spending ability. Furthermore, Leeds City Council has, as yet, had no consultation with refugee communities regarding the changes and has allocated no money towards informing non-English speakers of the changes. This means that for some refugees, the change won't just be disruptive; it will also be sudden.



Changes to Housing Benefits also have the potential to cause distress and, again, with a disproportionate impact on refugees. One of the first changes will target under-occupation. Housing Benefit claimants living in social housing who have a spare room will see their Benefit cut next year by 14% for one spare room and 25% for two. This could mean that individuals and families who have been settled in the same social housing for many years may be forced to leave their homes. John Hebden works for Abigail Housing; a Leeds-based charitable company that helps find and provide housing for refugees and asylum seekers. He points out

the rather unique impact this change will have on some refugees, especially those with family still to come to the UK, who he says love to bid for 2 bed council flats. Those who have been successful but are still waiting for their families to arrive will now be penalised, thus increasing their chances of homelessness. There will also be a Housing Benefit cap introduced, as part of the transition to Universal Credit. This primarily affects large families and refugees. Refugees, especially those coming from areas such as Bangladesh and Pakistan, are statistically far more likely to have large families. While this £500 limit will affect relatively few families in Leeds, in London the story is very different. Because of increasingly extortionate house prices, this cap could drive hundreds of larger families from their comfortable close-knit communities, with many London councils admitting they are looking at re-housing people outside of the city altogether. Moreover, with Duncan Smith, who himself has four children, now publicly flirting with the idea of capping Child Benefit at two children, the worst of these reforms could be yet to come for some families.

It seems as though a lot of number-crunching politicians in Westminster have little awareness of the grim-faced reality that some of the aforementioned changes will bring about. Accompanying them are cuts to the Social Fund, within which lie many of the emergency mechanisms that refugees and asylum seekers rely on in such tough times. It appears politicians are willing to drive refugees and asylum seekers into poverty and destitution in the hope that they might leave. Increasingly, it seems that we are going to see a need for charitable organisations, like Abigail Housing, to step in where the government has failed and deliver food, shelter and support for the impoverished. We can only hope that they are successful in doing so, so that the worst suffering is kept to a minimum while we wait for an improved economic outlook and a fairer set of welfare policies.

**Adam Jones**



# NEWCOMER VOLUNTEERING THE CONTEXT

Volunteering forms an important part of many asylum seekers' and refugees' UK experience. Research by Wilson and Lewis (2006) found that it presents one of the limited ways that newcomers can occupy themselves, make friends and learn English. Volunteering also enabled them to become more engaged with the host population and become familiar with the culture and employment conventions. For some, it counteracts the processes of 'deskilling' and loss of confidence associated with being prohibited from working whilst awaiting a decision on asylum claims.



Recent research in collaboration with PAFRAS, demonstrates that involvement in voluntary work is likely to continue after an individual receives a negative decision on their asylum claim. Equally, many refused are likely to proactively search for volunteering opportunities because their social participation becomes even more restricted.

The research revealed that for individuals in circumstances characterised by fear, insecurity, hopelessness and uncertainty; volunteering represents a coping mechanism through which improvements in mental health, a positive sense of identity and overall wellbeing are felt.

Unfortunately, there is considerable confusion surrounding volunteering performed by refused asylum seekers. It is not illegal but the UKBA (2010) guidance states;

"As a failed asylum seeker should not be in the UK at all ... discourage further voluntary activity."

This guidance conceals political purpose. It fails to take into account the multitude of reasons why individuals remain in the UK after receiving a negative decision. Neither does it recognize that the social processes involved in resettlement are not essentially tied to an individual's assigned immigration status. The guidance seems part of a destitution policy, designed to socially isolate and make individuals' circumstances so desperate as to coerce return and discourage future claimants.

New regulations on CRB checking came into effect on 31st August. As a result, asylum seekers and many refugees have to report to police stations to be re-fingerprinted to obtain CRBs. These changes impact many newcomer volunteers regardless of their immigration status. Previously, refugees and asylum seekers requiring CRBs could show a range of documents to prove their identity, because the Home Office already has their fingerprints. Without explanation, these documents have now been removed from the 'allowed' list.

The new arrangements for CRBs create separate system for asylum seekers away from the mainstream that mark them as 'different'; fingerprinting represents both awkward and degrading treatment for people who may have a fear of the police, through experiences in the UK or in their home country.

Davis Smith of Volunteering England and Beryl Randell of the Employability Forum have highlighted their concerns regarding the "unnecessarily restrictive" nature of the proposed changes. It will delay or prevent take up of volunteering opportunities by a asylum seekers and refugees for whom the Refugee Council have highlighted 'integration' should begin from day one.

 [www.star-network.org.uk](http://www.star-network.org.uk)

**Lora Evans**



University is a time where students thrive in throwing themselves into involvement in extracurricular activities, be it sport, media, or charity – and I was pleased to find that support for refugees and asylum seekers was no different.

Leeds University hosts a society of Student Action for Refugees (STAR), a nationwide network of student groups campaigning for refugees and asylum seekers. Funded by various grants and donations, STAR runs projects such as the Bike Project, in which they fix broken bikes to give to the refugee and asylum community, as well as campaigning to raise awareness. The biggest project in Leeds is their Common Conversation classes with asylum seekers and refugees, which I attended to get a greater insight into their work.

Twice a week, on a Wednesday and Saturday, a group of student volunteers walk to a community centre in Little London to meet with refugees and asylum seekers to help improve their English through conversation. When I emailed to enquire about the work of STAR, I was met with a warm and welcoming response from Laura, the teaching co-ordinator, inviting me to join them. The group meets at the University before walking down to the community centre together. On the walk down, Laura told me a little more about the work of STAR at Leeds. Having

volunteered with STAR since her first year, she commented on how rewarding it can be, as refugee and asylum students of the classes have told them of how the conversation classes helped pass college exams, but also day to day necessities such as filling out official forms. Yet, it is apparent that for many this is more than just a learning experience – there is very much a social side and a chance to feel more integrated within the community.

The atmosphere upon arrival is very informal and friendly, where tea and coffee is offered and there is no pressure to sit down and begin talking immediately. I chatted to one girl who was volunteering for the first time and therefore felt in the same, slightly nervous boat, as me. She told me how she had always wanted to get involved, and now was finally pushing herself to do it. It felt as though we both had a slight feeling of uncertainty of how to get started, but this was also underpinned by a sense of excitement to be involved. The room is laid out with small tables surrounded by chairs and volunteers and students alike are free to sit wherever they want at whenever they choose.

I proceeded to spend the rest of the classes talking to an Eritrean man who had lived in England for three years. I was sincerely impressed with his level of knowledge

regarding English language – whilst some of his vocabulary was lacking, his grammar skills were impeccable. It was a hugely positive experience to meet somebody so dedicated to their learning, as I found out that once he felt his English had improved he wanted to study English and Maths at college. I understood what Laura had told me about the social aspect, as though it is learning based, the conversations were so warm and funny that despite never having met before it was just like chatting to a friend.

One development Laura mentioned they had thought about was expanding to having a crèche, in order to encourage more women to come. The male to female ratio of students was noticeably high, and the few women that were there did tend to have brought their children. This would however, be a demanding growth, and it seemed unlikely that the volunteers would be able to give up much more time than they already were.

Societies like STAR are a fantastic example of projects that work both to integrate and support the refugee and asylum community. It is both encouraging and heart-warming to witness students and young people giving up their time and efforts to help. The society goes beyond raising money and sending it to a larger organisation, but makes a difference that can be felt on a personal level. I commend all those involved, and would highly recommend any student to get involved.

 [www.star-network.org.uk](http://www.star-network.org.uk)

 Leeds Uni Student Action for Refugees

 [commonconversation@gmail.com](mailto:commonconversation@gmail.com)

**Lizzie Scourfield**



# what is the public PERCEPTION of refugees and asylum-seekers in Britain today?

Newspaper headlines scream bad news. 'Asylum seekers live in huge houses'. Britain is a "soft touch". 'We are getting overrun'. 'Leave to remain granted for owner of pet cat'. These sentiments have been repeatedly expressed to the extent that they have taken root in the public consciousness. Newspapers reflect public concerns but they also shape opinion.

If certain publications have particular agendas about asylum seekers, it may be they feel the need to state their case in the belief that they can not rely on their readers to reach the same conclusions without persuasion. How do people really feel? Public surveys do not make pleasant reading. They show attitudes towards refugees may be hardening.

MORI's 2002 poll found that people overestimated the number of asylum seekers entering Britain. 15-18 year olds - the next generation of workers, voters and policy shapers - held particularly negative views. An Information Centre about Asylum and Refugees (ICAR) Factsheet in 2005 listed widely heard complaints about the number of asylum seekers, their "genuineness" and their supposed "preferential treatment". A YouGov survey in the same year revealed that 60% of respondents wanted to withdraw from the 1951 UN Convention which protects refugees.

## Reasons for Hope

These surveys could lead to a depressing conclusion about public perception but dig a little deeper and there are reasons for hope. MORI's 2002 poll was not all doom and gloom. Far more people said they would behave positively rather than negatively towards asylum seekers in their community. In 2010, MORI canvassed the views of asylum seekers and refugees. More than half found British people friendly. Only a fifth thought the average Britain was unwelcoming. In 2011, the Refugee Council found 82% of Britons consider caring for the vulnerable to be a British trait. 67% are sympathetic towards people entering Britain in difficult circumstances.

So what do these apparent contradictions tell us? Statistics are not definitive. If there is no consensus of opinion, why does the press consistently condemn asylum seekers? What are the implications for public perception? Research confirms that the trend is not supportive of refugees coming here. The Refugee Council found only 6% of press stories covered the beneficial

effects of having asylum seekers in Britain. MORI, in 2002, found the public associated "desperate", "bogus" and "illegal immigrant" with asylum.

The days of people believing everything they read have past. Knowledge is no longer accepted uncritically. The web provides a platform for those outside the establishment to express themselves. Scandals exposing the mainstream press as immoral and unreliable have hastened this mind shift. Last year's phone hacking scandal and the shaming of The Sun's headlines about the Hillsborough disaster are at the forefront of our thoughts. The media establishment can no longer be trusted to be truthful or to be acting in the public interest. But herein lays hope. The scaremongering approach to refugees can be challenged.

## What Can Be Done?

There is a focus on the contribution that refugees can make to society - if they are given the chance. Platforma promotes arts "by and about refugees". The City of Sanctuary movement is spreading across the country.

Perhaps the way into Britain's hearts and minds is through celebrity success stories. Brit Award winner Mika fled Lebanon as a child. Fabrice Muamba united the sport in hoping for, then celebrating his recovery from heart failure. The Independent's Yasmin Alibhai-Brown may be the most famous but not the only



success who sought refuge from Uganda. The list goes on and extends to the contribution made by the children of those given the opportunity to live here, free from oppression or persecution.

Those who denigrate asylum seekers do not give credit to these entertainers, academics and entrepreneurs who reward our communities. Neither do they make the effort to correct this omission. There is always 'proof' that the British public is fed up with being 'swamped' by 'scroungers'. Certainly, these views persist and there is much for us to do before the truth can emerge.

But there are reasons to be cheerful. The authority of mainstream media has been put into question by their repeated failings, their dominance diminished by thriving new forms of media. Opportunities exist to project a different message and there is cause for confidence that it will find a receptive audience. The British public is surely ready to embrace honest news, which is not cloaked in self-interest and manipulation but embossed by tolerance and unity.

**Steve McVeagh**



# A WORLD WITHOUT REFUGEES

BY JOHN OBIECHINA

In every corner of the world,  
violence and wars rage claiming lives and property.  
While lucky ones are able to  
escape from the heats of the crisis become refugees  
in their neighbouring communities  
struggling with limited resources.  
With such social imbalance,  
conflicts and scramble for resources  
become inevitable  
in those benevolent communities.

Reflecting on the genesis  
of most conflicts that occur around the world,  
it often commences from the individuals and groups  
who are often overwhelmed  
by the indefatigable grip on power  
or abysmal pursuit of personal interest  
against the general interest and will of others.

Based on this overriding interest of few over many  
and their unwillingness to conform  
for the greater good of all,  
its resultant consequences  
are evident in today's world  
that beacons for a peaceful resolution  
amongst wearying parties  
and charitable virtues amongst  
the already affected victims.

Despite the growing concern around the world  
of the need to embrace peace as an unfailing tool  
and the open sesame for a better world,  
it has succeeded in becoming  
an envious virtue within the minds of victims of cruelty  
rather than the only option for the  
initiators and propagators of such immorality

Every heart and soul  
desires peace whether personal or communal.  
Amongst communities and nations,  
the dream of a world free of refugees  
may just be another illusion  
or delusion amongst the proponents  
of an ideal world.  
But in all, no one can deny  
the immeasurable profits of peace to the world  
not just as a nomenclature for some  
but a priceless virtue for all.