

# Asylum controversy in UK

SAMUEL had a dream to go to the United Kingdom to make a better life and to be a professional soccer player. On the path towards fulfilling this almost impossible dream, Samuel moved in his youth from Burundi to Kenya. In Nairobi he found employment as a conductor of a *matatu*, East Africa's equivalent of a *minibus*. "Everything can be bought for money," he said, a statement he proved by buying a Kenyan passport. With a Kenyan passport in hand he secured a visitor's visa to the United Kingdom. He arrived in London with little money and no contacts. Samuel soon met other Africans who helped him get a job in the informal economy and find a place to live. He struggled to make ends meet, working almost day and night. His real dream was to find a way to earn a living with his football skills, but his intense work schedule precluded him from ever getting the opportunity.

After almost a year of struggling in London, Samuel was arrested for using an expired bus ticket. Upon his arrest, it was discovered that

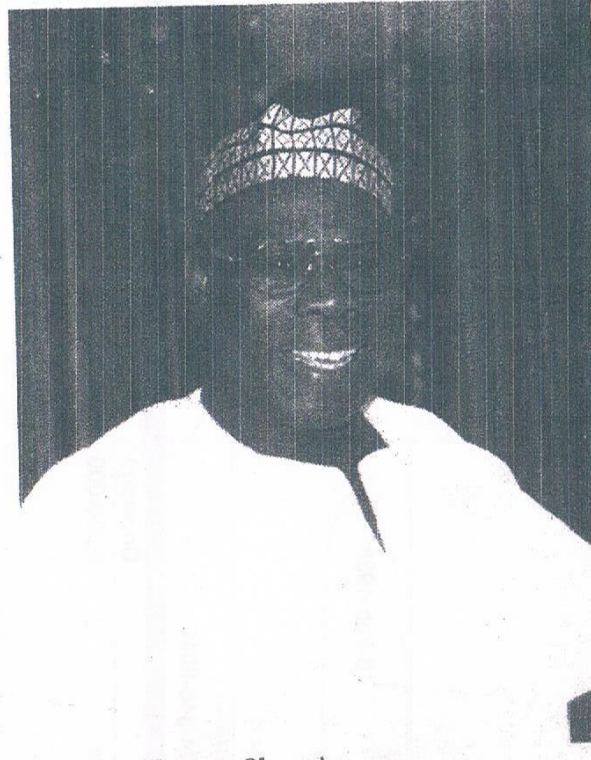


•British Prime Minister, Tony Blair

he was in Britain illegally. He had, however, filed for political asylum, entailing that the British government could not deport him before looking into his case. Samuel now awaits their judgement, even while admitting he has no real case for political asylum, only for economic asylum. Even

though economic difficulty can be as harsh a burden as political oppression, there is no allowance for economic migrants under the United Kingdom's immigration policy.

Samuel is now being held in an internment centre for asylum seekers who authori-



•President Olusegun Obasanjo

ties feel need to be closely watched. The facility in which he resides is surrounded by 18 foot high fences with barbed wire and protected by guards, security cameras, and electric doors. Within the walls, fences, and gates are kept 100 or so inmates officially guilty of no serious

crime. Few would imagine that such a detention centre could exist in rural England, but it does, and it is not the only such facility in the United Kingdom.

Far from being dangerous criminals, those housed within the walls are asylum seekers, people who had come to the United Kingdom

from around the world looking for freedom and a better future. The freedom of their dreams remains elusive, and the potential for a better future lies in the balance while outside the barbed wire a political battle is being waged about their fate.

As immigration to Britain has increased over the years, so too has the fear of the indigenes that they will be overrun and their island culturally transformed. In recent years, the immigration problem has been complicated by the issue of asylum seekers. In 1998, 46,000 people sought political asylum in Britain, and in 1999 the number jumped to 71,000, carrying the problem to near crisis proportions. Based on the United Nations Convention of 1951 and the even stronger European Convention on Human Rights, everyone asking for political asylum in the United Kingdom must be carefully considered, regardless of how spurious their claim is. Because of this and the inefficiency of the system in place to process their applications, there is now a backlog of over 100,000 asylum seekers.

These people are dependent on the government of the United Kingdom for support since they cannot legally work. This is obviously a huge financial burden, especially on the London boroughs in which asylum seekers are concentrated. In an attempt to reduce the burden on London, the Home Office has decided on a policy of disbursement whereby asylum seekers will be spread throughout the country as they await their ruling. By disbursing the asylum seekers, the government is cutting them off from supportive communities and taking them to live in places where they are often unwanted and where language barriers en-

tail they need far more government assistance.

Some of the dispersal that has already been done was poorly planned so that Somalis from warring factions were settled together since the government wanted all Somalis to be in the same place. In another place, the government settled French West Africans with asylum seekers from the Caribbean, assuming that since they were all black they would live well together.

The government's motto for their solution to the controversial dilemma of how to handle asylum seekers is "Firmier, faster, fairer."

They are certainly getting firmer, they hope to get faster, but with dispersal they are definitely not getting fairer. In the midst of all the political controversy and attempts to speed up the process are asylum seekers who for one reason or another are placed in the types of detention centres in which Samuel is being held. Many of those detained were never informed fully as to why they are being incarcerated and for how long they will remain in detention. They are held like criminals, but without the luxury of knowing why or for how long.

Another young man at the detention centre with Samuel was from Nigeria. To protect his identity from Nigerian readers, I will simply use the number by which he is categorized while in detention, #9A. #9A left Nigeria in February to visit a friend in London. Upon his arrival, he was arrested and imprisoned in solitary confinement under horrible conditions. During his brief incarceration, he applied for political asylum based on his involvement with the O'odua Peoples Congress, and was thereafter transferred to the internment centre.

In nearly two months, he has only met his solicitor once. "They say here they have human rights, but there

is none," #9A said. When he returns to Nigeria, he added, "I will give hell to any Englishman I meet."

#9A complained about the arbitrary room searches, and the terrible food they are fed. He finds that the British security guards are surprised

when he and other Nigerians refuse to eat the food they are given. "They assume that since we are from Africa we will be desperate to eat anything," he commented. This and other acts of defiance on the part of the Nigerians detained there have exhibited a level of pride which further frustrates the authorities. On this, #9A said, "We aren't subservient as Africans are expected to be, and that frustrates them."

At this point, #9A has no idea why he was first arrested, why he is being detained, and what his near or distant future will hold. His experience in the United Kingdom shocked him and shattered all his visions and dreams of what life in Europe would be like. He has learned quickly and harshly that life in the West is not necessarily as glorious as the image of it held by so many Nigerians and other Africans. As Samuel and #9A have both learned, instead of streets paved with gold and unprecedented opportunity, for

some life in Europe is only about disappointment, frustration and loneliness.

In spite of his hardships, Samuel claims to have no regrets leaving his family and friends in Africa to make a better life in Europe.

Whatever happens, he hopes he is not sent back to Kenya where he says there are too few opportunities. Instead, he hopes he can somehow make it to Ireland where he is told the government is friendlier to people like him.

This is not to say that opportunity does not exist for those who make it to the Western world from Africa. Many do achieve a great deal of success, but most end up in mid-level unskilled jobs they would never perform back in their country of origin.

For them, it is the future of their children they are struggling for. More than anything else, this article is to let people know the potential dangers of taking the gamble and leaving Africa without proper preparations. Like the examples of Samuel and #9A, dreams do not always come true.

