

BISHOP ATTACKS TREATMENT OF ASYLUM SEEKERS

A leading Church of England figure has launched a withering attack on the Government's treatment of asylum seekers, describing hundreds in the North East as "absolutely destitute". The Right Reverend Martin Wharton, Bishop of Newcastle, told an asylum conference that conditions some refugees live in across Northumberland, Tyneside and Durham are worse than Victorian workhouses. He claims 300 asylum seekers are living in appalling conditions in his city alone and that Government policy treated them as "less than human". Bishop Wharton cited the case of Elizabeth Kiwunga, 34, who fled to Darlington in 2006 because of the torture and rape she had suffered as a result of her husband's political stance in Uganda. Ms Kiwunga was seized by police from her home last year and taken to a detention centre in Bedfordshire with her children Marie, three, and John, six months, and was told she would be sent back. Speaking at a conference organised by the North of England Refugee Service, Bishop Wharton called on the Government – which he branded shameful – to radically alter its policy on deportation and the human rights of asylum seekers. Bishop Wharton said: "In the UK we have one of the worst human rights records in Europe. This is something of which we should be truly ashamed. "Our Government's continuing refusal to allow asylum seekers to work is something to be ashamed of. The fact that destitution is part of our Government's policy in the treatment of asylum seekers is something to be ashamed of. "The inhumane way in which people are treated by the UK Border Agency – collecting them early in the morning without the chance to wash or dress properly, without the chance to pack appropriate clothes and personal belongings often separating parents from young children is something to be ashamed of. "We must keep lobbying our Government for changes to their policies and processes. Figures released in January revealed that 3,635 people in the North East were now supported by the National Asylum Support Service. Bishop Wharton said at Newcastle's Civic Centre: "These are people with truly awful and harrowing stories – not people who are economic units to be considered in budgets or numbers to be considered in statistics. "They are people that you know. Some of them you know by first-hand experience. You know how asylum seekers are treated by officials, and neighbours and the general public. "You know this only too well. There are hundreds, no thousands, of people just like Elizabeth, in our region. They're longing for somewhere that is safe, secure, and somewhere they can call home. "You know how demeaning the process of applying for asylum can be, how hard it is to have to rely on other people's generosity. How frustrating it is not to be able to earn your own living. You know how frightened your children are of being with strangers. "I want to speak in particular about those people who find themselves totally destitute right here in our own city and region, either because they have not been granted asylum and are appealing against this decision, or because they have not been granted asylum. The North of England Refugee Service was established in 1989 and is a charitable organisation to promote the interests of asylum seekers and refugees who have arrived or have settled in the North East. Bishop Wharton, a religious leader in Newcastle since 1997, is a strong supporter and told the conference, including Labour MP for Stockton Dari Taylor, the Government stance on deportation was immensely damaging. He asked how asylum seekers were meant to live until their appeals had been heard when the Government made no provision for them and they were not allowed to seek work. He added: "Do we not realise that this enforced destitution policy is creating unnecessary dependency and contributing to popular racist myths of 'asylum scroungers'? This is seized upon of course by those extreme racist political parties which have no place in a so-called civilised society." Bishop Wharton, who was

addressing hundreds of officials and organisations from across the North East, warned that people were facing a choice between 'destitution and possible death' when negotiating the asylum system. He said: "It is shameful that people should be forced to choose between destitution in this country, or physical danger and sometimes death, in their own. "It is not surprising that the Parliamentary Joint Committee on Human Rights condemned the asylum support system as 'inhumane and degrading'. "How can it be, that in 21st Century, in the civilised and democratic country that is our own that people can be cast out without the financial and practical assistance and without the ability to seek to support themselves by finding work? "How can we treat people today in a way which is even less humane than the Victorians and their work-houses? "If it weren't for the charitable work of these services which are largely supported by church members, people would be in real danger of dying on our streets from starvation or hypothermia and certainly suffering from physical and mental health problems. He added: "As a Christian and as a Bishop I have the basic belief that every single human being is unique and precious."