

# HEADLINERS

## Coming of Age?

### **Two teenage girls who have been living in London for years now, as they turn 18, face being sent back to a country where they say they could be killed**

*Two teenage girls who have been living in London for years now, as they turn 18, face being sent back to a country where they say they could be killed...*

Imagine being forced to go back to a country where you had been tortured or persecuted, a place you had once escaped from, a place where you still feared for your life.

This is the horrifying reality for thousands of young asylum seekers living in Britain today. Annabel McLeod, a young journalist from Children's Express speaks to two teenage girls who have been living in Britain for years but now, as they turn 18, face being sent back to a country where they say they could be killed.

Last year I turned 18. Instead of celebrating my birthday with friends at a restaurant in London I could have been filling in forms begging the British government to let me stay here.

I was lucky enough to be able to celebrate in the way that most teenagers do but every year hundreds of young asylum seekers are not so fortunate.

In the first three months of this year 645 unaccompanied children applied for asylum in Britain. The government defines young people who arrive in Britain on their own and have no family or friends in the UK to support them, as 'unaccompanied young asylum seekers'.

They're asylum seekers because they say their country is too dangerous to return to.

A lot of them will be taken care of by social services until they are deemed old enough to look after themselves, which in legal terms means on their 18th birthday.

It's then that they have to reapply to the Home Office for permission to stay here, but most are unsuccessful and face deportation.

Alem and Lung are unaccompanied young asylum seekers living in London and will turn 18 in the next few months.

Lung was born in Vietnam and when she was eight years old her father was arrested, soon after her mother left her. She hasn't seen either of them since. She says her father's arrest put her in danger, which is why she left the country.

"The family problems started when my dad was arrested, because of that my mum lost her job. In my country if anyone in your family has trouble then you have trouble too. It became difficult to attend school; I left primary school in year four and stayed at home.

Two of my sisters went to live with my mum and I was left behind living with my aunty. But she married a man from another country and I couldn't live with them, so she arranged for me to come to England. My aunty said that if I really loved my family I would leave and come here as there was no one to look after me."

She arrived in London when she was 13, but things didn't get any easier.

"It was hard to get on because of the language and the culture. Every day when I came home from school I cried a lot. I kept saying that I wanted to go back home. Sometimes you have to accept the way things are, that things are out of your hands.

When I first came here if I had any problems, I would keep it inside and not tell anyone. If you live with family you might ask them to help, but I had no one. "

Soon Lung will turn 18 and if her claim for asylum is rejected she will be sent back to Vietnam, but she wants to stay here.

"I don't want to go back. Inside, I am still Vietnamese. But I don't have any relatives there and I don't know where they are. I really want to find out where my family are. My older sister is disabled and my mum is not well, so I want to take care of them."

There are many other stories like this. Home Office figures for 2003 show that 3,445 unaccompanied asylum-seeking children aged 17 or under applied to stay - 85% were accepted. However, it's a different story for those who apply when they're 18. In the same year, only 16% of them were allowed to stay.

Alem is Eritrean, and will also soon be 18, but she has already been told by the Home Office that she must go back to Africa. She arrived in Britain two years ago. It was the first time she had ever been on an aeroplane and when she arrived she thought she was still in Africa. The man she came with left her at the airport. She hasn't seen or heard from him since. She explains why he brought her here:

"Before my dad died, he gave his friend money and told him to look after me. He decided to put me on a plane and told me we were going to see my Eritrean family. He said we couldn't take the train because it was too far away. We arrived in England and he said I had to be strong and ask someone for help. I did not speak English at that time so I just cried."

Just like Lung, Alem grew up without her mother: "My mum left when I was young so I don't know my mum's family. I don't know my mum. I just know her picture."

She grew up with her dad, but they had a difficult life together.

"My mum was Ethiopian and my dad was Eritrean. Ethiopia and Eritrea is divided by two, they have two governments. If you are Eritrean you cannot stay in Ethiopia. Because my dad was Eritrean, no one loved him and no one liked him in Ethiopia."

Her dad got put in prison but two months later he died. She says she still misses him: "My dad was my mum, my dad was my brother, my dad was everything."

Every night I dream about my dad."

Alem knows that she could soon be sent back to Eritrea by the British government, as they have already refused her application for asylum. A decision she is appealing.

"They think I am 18 but I am 17. They think I am lying. My lawyer sent me to the doctor and the doctor said I was right and the judge believed me. But the Home Office does not believe me. I have documents saying I am not 18 and still they don't believe me."

Alem is a Jehovah Witness and because of this she is petrified of going back to Eritrea.

"At night time I can't sleep, I get depressed. I sit alone on my bed thinking, 'oh my god, where will I go?' I am worried. I am scared of the government in Eritrea. When I was there I was put in prison for two months and I got hurt. If I go there I will have to go to prison or the government will kill me. They do not like Jehovah Witnesses."

As she spoke she showed us some scars on her body, where she says she was beaten and hurt by people in prison.

"I feel England is my home now. When I stay here no one tells me to go to prison. I study my religion and college and that is why I call England my home. I do not want to go back to Eritrea. No way. I think I will kill myself if I have to go back. I lost my dad before and I went to prison for two months, so no way."

It was upsetting to hear Alem say she would kill herself. It made me realise how scared she must be of going back. I imagine how I would feel if it was me. Instead of looking forward to my 18th birthday I would have been dreading it, worrying about getting sent back to a country where I might have been killed. I am worried about them both and I wonder what will happen to them now.

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### About the team

This story was produced by Annabel McLeod, 18 and Ginisha Sadasivan, 15. It was published by BBC London website.

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