

# HEADLINERS

## "I'm being returned to a place I don't know.."

**17-year-old Alem is an unaccompanied asylum seeker; who will be forced to return to a country she escaped from and where she knows no-one.**

*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. Ginisha Sadasivan, 16, and Annabel McLeod, 19, two young journalists from the news agency Children's Express investigate.*

"At night I can't sleep, I get depressed. I sit alone on my bed thinking, 'oh my god, where will I go?'"

These are the words of Alem, a 17 year old girl, scared and lonely as she is caught in a deportation battle with the British government. She says the UK is the only place she feels safe and is frightened of returning to Eritrea. Home Office figures show that in the first three months of this year 760 unaccompanied children applied for refugee status in Britain. Behind this statistic is Alem. This is her story...

Alem is defined as an unaccompanied young asylum seeker. She arrived in the UK in 2003 with her dad's friend who told her they were flying to another part of Eritrea to be reunited with their family. It was the first time she had ever been on an aeroplane and when she arrived here she did not realise she had left Africa. The man she came with abandoned her at the airport and she never saw him again.

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

Most unaccompanied children are looked after by social services until they reach 18. After that, they have to reapply for permission to stay as adults, but most are unsuccessful and face deportation. This is Alem's predicament, she has applied to the Home Office to stay but they have told her she must go back to Eritrea, but she refuses to give up is and is appealing that decision.

Alem fears persecution by the Eritrean government. She is a Jehovah's Witness and because of this she says they want to kill her.

"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 back, I will have to go to prison or the government will kill me. They do not like Jehovah Witnesses."

As she spoke to us she showed us scars on her body, where she says she was beaten when she was put in prison with her dad. He died two months later. But still the British government believe she will be safe in Eritrea even though she says they were persecuted because of who they were.

"My mum is 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."

Alem was devastated by her dad's death, she says she still misses him: "My dad was my mum, my dad was my brother, and my dad was everything. Every night I dream about my dad."

She is afraid of going back to a country where she has no family, as her mother left her when she was young and she only knows her face from an old photograph.

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

Alem lives in constant fear of being arrested and removed from the UK. She did not choose to come here and it is unlikely she will have the choice to stay.

Her story shocked us but it is far from isolated, and one which thousands of young asylum seekers turning 18 will identify with. Unfortunately for most their stories do not end well as most are deported. Home Office figures for 2004 – the most recent – show that 3,005 unaccompanied asylum-seeking children aged 17 or under applied to stay – of these, 75 per cent were accepted. However, it is a different story for those who reapplied at 18. In the same year, only 0.7 per cent of them were allowed to stay.

So why are so many young people deported when they have grown up here? We put that question to the Home Office. In a statement they said:

"Every applicant receives the same careful scrutiny of their claim regardless of their age. What changes is that the special arrangements for asylum seeking children are not available to adults."

It seems harsh that one day you could be classed as a child and receive British protection and the next day you are told to leave. The Children's Society Parliamentary Advisor, Patricia Durr, agreed and explained why turning 18 can be a difficult time for young unaccompanied asylum seekers:

"There's a whole gamete of emotions they are going through in their heads because they just don't know what's going to happen to them. We're working with young people in an adult system that doesn't respond to children and young people's needs. We believe they should be treated as children first and asylum seekers second."

But the government seems to treat them as an asylum seekers first and children second. Is this because there isn't enough room in Britain for everyone?

Patricia Durr, doesn't think so. "The UK has historically been seen as a safe haven - a good place to go to get protection. I think that's a record we should be proud of and not fearful of."

However, the Home Office told us they always offer protection to people who need it. "Asylum will always be granted... on the grounds of reasonable likelihood that the applicant has demonstrated a well-founded fear of persecution..."

Alem certainly demonstrated to us a well-founded fear of persecution. She will soon know whether she has successfully convinced the Home Office too. For now all she can do is wait.

## About this story

This story was produced by Ginisha Sadasivan, 16, and Annabel McLeod, 19. It was published on the [BBC London](#) website won the best writing award in the 16+ category in the [British Library's Front Page competition](#).

## 4 comments

turning 18

i wanna say homeoffice should think about their decision that after becoming 18 asylum seekers who failed must leave the uk. Its injustice and breach of humanrights and we must protest about it. I think we have to stop that because i know what them chid who becomes 18 gonna face

ahmed (age 17) from sheffield, 21 May 2008 15:03

I AM 19 YEARS OLD ERITREAN

I AM 19 YEARS OF ERITREAN, I AM LIVING AT STOKE ON TRENT AT THE MOMENT. WHEN I ARRIVED TO THIS COUNTRY I WAS 17 YEARS OLD. AND HOME OFFICE (NASS)MOVED ME OUT OF MY ACCOMMODATION AND I PAST MANY PROBLEMS IN UK.

siraj RAMADAN (age 19) from STOKE ON TRENT, 07 May 2008 14:05

07

I AM 19 YEARS OF ERITREAN, I AM LIVING AT STOKE ON TRENT AT THE MOMENT. WHEN I ARRIVED TO THIS COUNTRY I WAS 17 YEARS OLD. AND HOME OFFICE (NASS)MOVED ME OUT OF MY ACCOMMODATION AND I PAST MANY PROBLEMS IN UK.

siraj RAMADAN (age 19) from STOKE ON TRENT, 30 December 1899 00:00

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