



**MINUTES ARISING FROM THE INDEPENDENT CHIEF INSPECTOR OF THE UKBA,
INDEPENDENT ADVISORY GROUP ON COUNTRY INFORMATION (IAGCI) ON 13TH
OCTOBER 2011**

Venue: 6th Floor, Globe House
89 Eccleston Square
London
SW1V 1PN

Present:

Members	<p>(Chair) Khalid Koser (KK) - Geneva Centre for Security Policy Elena Fiddian-Qasmiyeh (EF)- University of Oxford Laura Hammond (LH) - School of Oriental & African Studies Andrew Jordan (AJ) - First Tier Tribunal Christopher McDowell (CM) - The City University, London Ceri Oeppen (CO) - University of Exeter Blanche Tax (BT) - UNHCR (Geneva)</p>
Representatives from ICIUKBA	<p>Stuart Harwood (SH) - Independent Chief Inspector's office Mark Voce (MV) - Independent Chief Inspector's office</p>
Representatives from COIS	<p>Roseanna Atherton (RA) - UK Border Agency Janice Campbell (JC) - UK Border Agency Ralph Clarkson (RC) - UK Border Agency Pauline Crichlow (PC) - UK Border Agency Debbie Goodier (DG) - UK Border Agency Adam Lavine (AL) - UK Border Agency Robin Titchener (RT) - UK Border Agency</p>
Commissioned reviewers	<p>Heaven Crawley (HC) - University of Swansea Alan George (AG) - University of Oxford Stephanie Huber (SHu) - Asylum Research Consultancy Diana Jeater (DJ) - University of West England Apurba Kundu (AK) - Anglia Ruskin University Maung Zarni (MZ) - London School of Economics</p>
Observers	<p>Erin Power (EP) - UKLGIG Christel Querton - Asylum Aid</p>

<u>Agenda Item</u>	<u>Issue</u>	<u>Action point</u>
<u>Introduction</u>	<p>The chair welcomed everyone to the Chief Inspector's Independent Advisory Group on Country Information.</p> <p>KK expressed his thanks to authors of reviews and reports to be discussed.</p> <p>KK expressed his thanks to Richard Lederle, former head of COIS at the UK Border Agency who represented COIS at IAGCI meetings. RT has taken over as acting Head of COI Service and KK acknowledged his and his team's efforts to prepare for this meeting.</p> <p>KK expressed his thanks to Jerome Sabety, representative of UNHCR, Geneva, for his work on IAGCI. Jerome has now been replaced by BT.</p>	
1.0 <u>Chair's report</u>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ The minutes from the IAGCI meeting in January were accepted. ○ KK informed the group that he will contact the European Asylum Support Office (EASO) to see whether there is interest in considering IAGCI as a model to of good practice to consider. ○ KK informed the group that he plans to attend the next meeting of the Austrian Advisory Council on Country of Origin Information. He has also invited its Chair to attend an IAGCI meeting. AJ asked if there are other European organisations doing similar things, BT not aware of any. 	1. KK to contact EASO
1.1	<p>KK reviewed the action points from the last IAGCI meeting. The outstanding issues were:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Request for an information sheet detailing COIS' history and current organisational structure, <i>Background Note on Country of Origin Information Service</i> was circulated to the group. ○ New IAGCI members to visit COIS in Croydon. 	<p>2. New IAGCI members to organise visit to COIS in Croydon by next meeting</p> <p>3. IAGCI members who have not yet done so, to send</p>

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Possibility of COIS access to subscription services via university contacts - CM said talks are still ongoing with his university. ○ IAGCI members to send a brief biography of themselves and who they represent to Alex Marinkovic, Independent Chief Inspector's office, for use on the website. 	<p>biography to Alex Marinkovic at ICIUKBA.</p> <p>4. RT to update the information sheet on COIS</p>
<p>2.0</p> <p><u>Thematic Inspection on the use of COI</u></p>	<p>MV summarised the findings of the Independent Chief Inspector's report "<i>The use of country of origin information in deciding asylum applications: A thematic inspection</i>", which was published in July 2011.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ BT asked if COI provided in response to individual adjudicators' queries is retained and made available publicly or to other adjudicators. RT replied that COIS responds to individual requests for information. These are published on the Home Office's intranet but not publicly; they are usually subsumed into country reports. Reported that individual case-owners may conduct their own research. It may be that themes and patterns of these cases are lost by not noting systematic claim profiling. <p>A discussion followed on UK Border Agency's decision to reject the recommendation of the report, which was to remove all COI information from policy documents, most specifically Operational Guidance Notes (OGN).</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ KK asked if IAGCI should get involved on this issue. MV said that there was a need to check legislation on the Independent Chief Inspector's role and the mandate of IAGCI. RT thinks that UK Border Agency might resist IAGCI involvement in OGNs since they are not COI documents but policy. KK said that the mandate of the IAGCI was to look at COI. AJ said that at the conclusion of any review of COI in OGNs would be that it is unrepresentative, and he believes that it is not for IAGCI to look at. 	

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ CM asked why UK Border Agency is resistant to removing COI from OGN's. RT replied that OGNs fall outside his unit's responsibility, but he understood the UKBA's response to the review had been that if country information was removed OGNs would simply consist of a series of assertions without context. LH said that Refugee and Asylum Forum (RAF) members were disappointed about UK Border Agency rejection of this recommendation, and they want the Chief Inspector to look at COI in OGNs and to report back. ○ KK said that a proposal could be to request reviewers to look at COI in OGN's alongside the country reports, when they report back. An alternative might be a one-off project. ○ AJ believes that OGNs are seen as a submission from the Presenting Officer. BT said there was concern that independent adjudicators rely on a few paragraphs of COI in OGNs to make a decision. MV and inspection team asked decision makers and were told that they must follow policy and look at whole of COI. BT asked how it can be tested that the whole of COI is being used. AJ replied that the accuracy of decision letters contains the answer; OGN should be an extension of the refusal letter. ○ KK felt that the entire panel should decide on this issue. OGNs to be on the IAGCI agenda at the next meeting. MV and SH to discuss with John Vine what he heard at the last RAF meeting and what he feels on OGNs. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 5. KK to add a consideration of OGNs to the next IAGCI agenda. 6. SH/MV to discuss this issue with JV in advance of meeting.
<p>3.0 <u>IAGCI</u> <u>Commissioned</u> <u>Reviews:</u> <u>Burma</u></p>	<p>KK introduced MZ, who reviewed the Burma COI report, written by PC.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Very useful report and excellent review. MZ commended PC for her work. Report particularly shows an impressive depth of knowledge and understanding of the situation in Burma. Reviewer adds further sources, additional analysis and updates, to the COIS 	

	<p>country report.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">○ BT highlighted the recommendation for using local language sources despite COIS resource constraints. Also recommends the use of local organisations as sources, in particular local human rights groups (e.g. Karen Human Rights Group, Kachin Women's Association of Thailand) – especially useful for closed countries without international press coverage and limited monitoring presence. BT highlighted the benefits of using books for e.g. historical topics, despite preference on publicly available internet-based sources. BT thought it would be helpful for COIS to seek clarification from FCO over reviewer's doubts over information provided by FCO.○ BT pointed out that The Report of the Special Rapporteur on the Situation of Human Rights in Myanmar of 7 March 2011 was not referred to in the Burma COI despite timeframe. Details on 'portering' (a form of forced labour) is an important element of human rights abuses in Burma, but is not given much detailed attention. Report does not describe in any detail the consequences/impact of detention in practice; only the legislative framework is described. The impact of land confiscations and other violations of Housing, Land and Property rights were lacking in COI, whilst there was a lack of findings on the consequences of desertion.○ CM praised MZ for highlighting bureaucratic processes and arbitrary imprisonment practices of Burmese government. UK Border Agency struggles to see people having strong asylum cases without bureaucratic processes in place.○ PC said she was happy to include further information on forced labour.○ RT said that weighing up of	
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	<p>information could be helped by compiling a document that listed frequently used sources and providing some background about these.. He said that COIS could be more explicit about how information is found.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ KK said that IAGCI can help COIS with capacity building e.g. in terms of sessions on identifying and prioritising sources. 	
<p>4.0 <u>IAGCI</u> <u>Commissioned</u> <u>Reviews:</u> <u>Gambia</u></p>	<p>KK introduced SHu, who reviewed the Gambia COI report, written by RC.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ KK noted that the review was overwhelmingly positive about the report ○ CM commended the extremely thorough review, providing useful additional sources which have been checked for accessibility. Highlighted the use of access dates when referencing sources, saying that the date of origin is needed too. COIS says this is usual practice but had not followed on this occasion. Also asked RT if corrections would be amended straight away or in next update of COI report. RT said that factual errors would be corrected straight away, but gaps in information could wait until next update. CM said that dealing with factual errors straight away was key; at present it looks like updates are being put to one side for six months. ○ RC agreed to go back and correct errors. Said that USSD provided a useful basis for information, and that generally COI will expand on information around that. ○ KK recommended that annexes listing sources in alphabetical order should be inserted into all reports in future. RT said it was difficult to change from numbering, but will look to into doing this. ○ BT suggested a source list. KK replied that COIS is under pressure due to losing staff. Have to appreciate this context. ○ AJ suggested a list of important topics in COI reports based on recent asylum applications. RT said 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 7. RT to circulate COI report template to Group. 8. KK to consider adjusting terms of reference to clarify position on sub-contracting.

	<p>there was no centralised process for collecting data on application types. RT said there is a standard template for all reports, but COIS shape it to different countries. The current template was designed in 2006 and COIS is likely to review it shortly. KK offers IAGCI support in this process. BT said that it is worth COIS reviewing and examining template -, a standardised template could direct people away from important issues.</p>	
<p>5.0 <u>IAGCI</u> <u>Commissioned</u> <u>Reviews: India</u></p>	<p>KK introduced AK, who reviewed the India COI report, written by AL.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ The reviewer noted that this was an excellent report, that represented a substantial improvement on the previous COI report on India ○ KK highlighted AK's suggestion of an action matrix to see if recommendations that were accepted are implemented. This triggered a broader discussion of implementation of accepted ICIUKBA recommendations, which the Chief Inspector is discussing with the Chief Executive. ○ BT said that colleagues at UNHCR had specific comments, will compile a list and send to AL. ○ RT said that India raises a challenge for reporting due to its size. KK said that the COIS equivalent in Australia bases their reports on themes rather than countries, e.g. Health in India. RT said that smaller, discrete documents could work. BT highlighted the example of the current situation in Sudan where it might be more appropriate to prepare regionalised reports, rather than on the whole country. Asked if there was a rule to do it based on countries, or could it be presented according to regions or themes KK suggested that a discussion of the relative merits of country reports vs. discrete thematic reports could be discussed when we discuss the templates for country reports at the next meeting ○ CM questioned why someone can 	<p>9. BT to send list of UNHCR comments on refugee section of report to AL.</p> <p>10. KK and RT to look at letter that goes from COIS to reviewers.</p>

	<p>not do some claim profiling to identify patterns. This was similar to recommendation 3 in the Chief Inspector’s report on COI. AJ also said that it is hard to concentrate resources when looking at a whole COI document. A thematic outline would help this.</p>	
<p>6.0 <u>IAGCI</u> <u>Commissioned</u> <u>Reviews:</u> <u>Occupied</u> <u>Palestine</u> <u>Territories</u> <u>(OPT)</u></p>	<p>KK introduced AG, who reviewed the OPT COI report. JC had not written the report, but managed the researcher who had drafted the report.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ AG noted that overall the report was very good. ○ Significant and impressive set of comments and suggestions by the reviewer. ○ EF welcomed the COI team’s constructive responses to and engagement with these suggestions. ○ EF highlighted the inconsistency of terminology used by COIS in responding to reviewer. Discrepancies regarding usage of “may be used” and “partly accepted” vs. “accepted”. Also discrepancies in paragraph numbers referred to by COIS and the paragraph numbers in the report. ○ AG said that section on mental health in OPT COI report should be expanded. ○ Discussion around the use of biased and propagandist sources between AG and RT. AG maintained that a tainted source will taint the whole document. Social media (Facebook, Twitter, Wikipedia) and its consequence on source reliability, especially in Middle East. ○ KK – IAGCI to work with COIS on methodology of sources. ○ EF encouraged the inclusion of a section on statelessness; especially significant with reference to important points regarding the registration of children and the legal status of children and parents. 	<p>11. RT to change COIS response at paragraph 54 to accept</p>

<p>7.0 <u>IAGCI</u> <u>Commissioned</u> <u>Reviews:</u> <u>Zimbabwe</u></p>	<p>KK introduced DJ, who reviewed the Zimbabwe COI report, written by DG.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ DG began by stating that the report was an impressive piece of work ○ RT said that US State Department (USSD) is in general terms a reliable source. However, there was discussion of reference to of primary information quoted by the USSD Where possible, COIS should trace this source back to the primary source. AJ discussed neutrality about US State Department. ○ Discussion on the value of Fact Finding Missions (FFMs) as evidence – do they need to be qualified with other evidence or credible on their own? LH – issue of unnamed sources in FFM, whether there is an agenda in FFMs, do we need to consider the terms of reference for FFMs? Problems gathering information on what happens to involuntary returnees, is this in the terms of reference for FFMs? ○ LH – referencing case law and court determinations carries risks as they may have been wrong e.g. if the Tribunal decides that a piece of information is not reliable, that then becomes ‘fact’ even if an independent expert considers it not to be. RT clarified that case law was not sourced in the report but was referenced in one of COIS responses to a comment made by DJ. ○ LH – why is there a limit on the length of information given about arbitrary arrest? RT – there is no limit. The section was kept brief to provide an overview, further information was provided in linked sections on political affiliation. ○ DJ said that Freedom House is not a good source, and if better sources are available, to use them instead. 	<p>12. RT to email DJ to ask for sources on patronage.</p>
<p>8.0 <u>IAGCI</u> <u>Commissioned</u> <u>Reviews:</u></p>	<p>KK introduced HC, who compiled a thematic review on the presence of Women’s Issues in COI reports.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ EF said that the the cross-cutting 	

<p><u>Thematic on Women's Issues</u></p>	<p>review highlights the need for consistency in structure and content across reports, and highlights key areas which require further attention/consideration.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ She added that, while recognising that COIS only had a short timeframe to respond to the review, COIS responses also reflect the need for consistency both across countries and across key issues. ○ EF added that clear action points are missing at times and systematic terminology should be used to facilitate follow up and assessment of whether changes have been implemented as agreed. ○ EF stated that certain COIS responses fail to engage with all points and suggestions raised by the reviewer – e.g. where COIS notes “partly accepted”, the subsequent comments do not systematically indicate which points are rejected/contested. On other occasions, COIS notes “not accepted” following a paragraph, and yet in the COIS comments selected points are then “agreed” upon. ○ HC focused on women, but needed gender context in order to fully understand what happens. ○ EF – issue whether “women and girls” and “men and boys” should be considered as separate or joint sections. Issue of age differentiation between countries and the recognition of women and men. One suggestion may be to have the main section heading as Gender, with sub-headings for Women, Girls, Men, Boys, LGBT, etc with appropriate cross referencing. ○ EF comments on male hegemony in COI reports – although COI produced without a gendered lens may present a hegemonic masculine perspective, a gendered lens is essential to identify the heterogeneity of male experiences and protection needs of different groups of men in a given country. ○ Future recruitment for the COIS team might prioritise multi-lingual 	<p>13. RT to review COIS comments and amend before publication of review on ICIUKBA website</p>
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	<p>researchers with proficiency in key languages.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Could also identify news bulletins/summaries translated by Embassy or Consular staff in given countries of origin or to draw more systematically on European COI counterparts who may have access to information in French etc. Al Jazeera may have publicly-available transcripts – could bridge distinction made between written and non-written sources. ○ KK asked for a view on having a standard template for a women's section. AL believed it was feasible but needed to be country-oriented. Discussion around a women's section starting with a general overview or description of women's situations in specified country. ○ BT raised a key gap; the limited information presented on women 'on the ground', as often we see decision makers cite the applicable legal framework as evidence women experience safety without considering what happens on the ground. Similarly, information on the role of local women's organisations needs to be precise; their mere existence cannot be interpreted as protection being available. ○ AJ believes that cross-cutting reviews are valuable as they allow the comparison of treatment of different subjects. Also said that reports should be based on a checklist rather than a list of subheadings, and should be topic centred, as opposed to country centred. He also raised the issue of cross-referencing between reports ○ EP said COI reports do not have a lot of information on lesbian or transgender issues, but there is more on gay males. Believes this is because lesbians are driven underground to such an extent that evidence does not exist in research. ○ Wasn't possible to discuss the countries reviews as not everyone has seen review or had enough time to respond. Couldn't discuss 	<p>14. Group to compile check list of issues to be considered for inclusion in women's section of COI reports.</p> <p>15. RT, KK and HC to correspond online to get women's review ready for publication.</p>
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	<p>in-depth if 80 days work is worthwhile and how to check that recommendations are implemented.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Workload indicates the need for a higher pay for future thematic reviews BT suggested a more general discussion on the structure of and headings used in the COI reports, as there are different approaches possible to organising the information in a logical accessible manner (e.g. information on lesbian asylum-seekers can go under a women section, under an LGBT section, or both , with or without cross-referencing). 	
<p>9.0 <u>AOB</u></p>	<p>KK confirmed that CM will be in Kyrgyzstan for a year, but will remain an IAGCI member in his absence. CM will send in correspondence for each meeting.</p> <p>KK informed the group that the next meeting will revert back to a half-daily session, and dates will be circulated to members for February.</p> <p>The group confirmed that the work plan for February would include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Nigeria ○ Uganda ○ Operational Guidance Notes (OGN) discussion ○ Discussion on the template and structure of COI reports. <p>KK agreed with the group that two COIs needing to be reviewed, Libya and Sudan, will take place later in 2012.</p> <p>KK informed the group that there should be one cross-cutting review per year. Will commission review on children for later in 2012.</p> <p>SH said that the new Chief Executive, Rob Whiteman, will receive first Chair Report from this group.</p>	<p>16. KK to propose date and agenda for next meeting.</p>
<p><u>Next Meeting</u></p>	<p>Next meeting to be held on 28th February 2012 at Globe House.</p>	