



**MINUTES ARISING FROM THE INDEPENDENT CHIEF INSPECTOR OF THE UKBA,
INDEPENDENT ADVISORY GROUP ON COUNTRY INFORMATION (IAGCI) ON 28TH
FEBRUARY 2012**

Venue: 5th Floor, Globe House
89 Eccleston Square
London
SW1V 1PN

Present:

Members	Khalid Koser (Chair) (KK)	-	Geneva Centre for Security Policy
	Laura Hammond (LH)	-	School of Oriental & African Studies
	Ceri Oeppen (CO)	-	University of Sussex
	Blanche Tax (BT)	-	UNHCR (Geneva)
	Michael Collyer (MC)	-	University of Sussex

Representatives from ICIUKBA

	Stuart Harwood (SH)	-	Independent Chief Inspector's office
	Alex Marinkovic (AM)	-	Independent Chief Inspector's office

Representatives from COIS

	Ralph Clarkson (RC)	-	UK Border Agency
	James Stephenson (JS)	-	UK Border Agency
	Robin Titchener (RT)	-	UK Border Agency
	Nick Smith (NS)	-	UK Border Agency
	Amanda Wood (AW)	-	UK Border Agency

Commissioned reviewers

	Liz Williams (LW)	-	Asylum Research Consultancy
	Jackie Sheehan (JSn)	-	Nottingham University

Observer

	Nino Hartl (NH)	-	EASO
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Apologies:

	Andrew Jordan (AJ)	-	First Tier Tribunal
	Christopher McDowell (CM)	-	The City University, London
	Elena Fiddian-Qasmiyeh (EF)	-	University of Oxford

<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 introduced James Stephenson as the new head of the COI Service who gave a brief summary of his career within the Home Office. He has been a case owner, senior case owner and worked in appeals so he has a good understanding of what COI is for. He still retains his appeals responsibilities and works at the COI service for at least 2 days a week.</p> <p>KK stated that the group would monitor whether the shift from a full-time to part-time Head of COIS has any impact on the quality of COI reports and the ability of IAGCI to fulfil its tasks.</p>	
<u>1.0 Chair's report</u>	<p>The minutes from the IAGCI meeting in October 2011 were accepted.</p> <p>KK informed the group that he was unable to attend the meeting of the Austrian Advisory Council on Country of Origin Information due to a clash in schedules but hoped to do so at the next meeting which is in June.</p>	
<u>1.1</u>	<p>KK reviewed the action points from the last IAGCI meeting. The outstanding issues were:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ New IAGCI members and Laura Hammond to visit COIS in Croydon. This was still in progress but some dates had been suggested by JS which AM and LH could attend. ○ 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. There was only one member left to provide this. ○ KK advised that in regard to action point 8 he had desisted in forwarding an explanation letter 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. AM to organise visit to COIS in Croydon by next meeting 2. IAGCI members who have not yet done so, to send biography to Alex Marinkovic at ICIUKBA.

	<p>from COIS to the new country reviewers and this seemed to have solved the confusion surrounding who the reviewer thought their review was for. The letter will no longer be sent.</p>	
<p>1.2</p>	<p>LH gave an update on the Refugee and Asylum Forum meeting. She explained that John Vine talked about his inspectorate's work. There was nothing else to report.</p> <p>KK said that it would be preferable for one of the new IAGCI members to attend the next RAF meeting</p>	<p>3. KK to prioritize one of the new IAGCI members to attend the next RAF meeting</p>
<p>2.0 <u>IAGCI</u> <u>Commissioned</u> <u>Reviews:</u> <u>China</u></p>	<p>KK introduced LW and JSn, who reviewed the China report, written by RC.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ LW said the report was of a high standard and there were very few instances of irrelevant information ○ There were some additional sources that she thought had been missed but she has provided. ○ She felt that to emphasise and expand on certain issues, COIS could increase the cross-referencing between sections and by re-ordering and renaming certain sections. ○ She was unable to review the sources that were subject to subscription and wondered if there was a way to make this kind of material available to a reviewer ○ JSn stated that with regard to the political system , better sources are available and had been provided. ○ She was pleased that the section on women was being expanded ○ JSn suggested that COIS might wait until the Chinese National Congress had been held before updating the COI report as important decisions were often made there. ○ KK invited comment from the group. RC stated that he would seek to amend his report as much as he could, which would be around July or August. ○ A discussion formed around the use of subscription services. KK 	

	<p>stated the use of subscription services was problematic in terms of transparency and wondered if COIS could manage without resorting to this. RT explained that COIS were unable to reproduce the information found on subscription services as this could be a breach of copyright but he would seek further advice. RC felt he could refrain from their use but maintained they were useful and saved time. AW added that whilst she had relied on them when first completing a COI report, she was now using them less. MC believed that the British Library was subscribed to some services, such as Jane's, and that this resource could be used by the group to review such information.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ CO had taken responsibility on behalf of the IAGCI lead for the China review and she thought it was a good review which provided lots of useful additional sources ○ She felt that COIS had not responded fully to the reviewer's comments and were sometimes ambiguous about what they were accepting and what they were not. ○ CO found that, when she had reviewed the Afghanistan report, COIS were sometimes very good at changing headings and reordering the report but then at times suggested that they were unable to change the structure of the report. This seemed contradictory. KK agreed that greater clarification of what could be changed and what could not was needed. JS said they were looking into this and although they do like to stick to the structure they could be flexible. ○ KK explained that the group expected COIS to respond fully to a reviewer's comments. He requested that they assess the review once more and provide comments more fully. ○ BT summarised the UNHCR document which commented on the COIS report. They had 	<p>4. COIS to update the group on the use of information garnered from subscription services</p> <p>5. COIS to assess the IAGCI review of the China report and provide further comments</p>
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	<p>commented on the fact that the sources tended to be English language sources from the UK, US and Canada and she wondered why the reviewers had not picked up on this. She believed these could contain a bias. JSn explained that these were the sources she would typically rely on when acting as an expert witness in asylum cases although she had provided links to Radio Free Asia which reported in a number of Asian languages as well as English .</p> <p>A discussion followed concerning the use of bulletins by COIS. JS explained that a bulletin filled in the gaps in a COI report where there was a need and a new COI report was not imminent. KK wondered if these were something that the group could inspect.</p>	
<p>3.0 <u>IAGCI</u> <u>Commissioned</u> <u>Reviews:</u> <u>Nigeria</u></p>	<p>KK summarised the Nigeria review, written by NS, on behalf of the reviewer, Dr Gernot Klantschnig who was unable to travel to the meeting from China. KK noted that the reviewer thought the report was very good and that the reviewer was particularly impressed by how many local sources were used.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ KK had looked at this review on behalf of the IAGCI. He highlighted that the responses from COIS were brief and didn't seem to respond to each point individually. NS agreed to assess the comments once more and try to comment more fully. KK thanked him and would make sure that this updated version would go on the website. ○ KK explained that the reviewer's main concern was the use of the term 'corruption' to cover a wide range of different activities. The reviewer also pointed out that corruption is more widespread than indicated in the report but it is under-reported. ○ CO was confused that when there was nothing written under a heading, in this case security issues, did this mean that there was no issue or that no information 	<p>6. COIS to assess the IAGCI review of the Nigeria report and provide further comments</p>

	<p>could be found? RT thought that some information could always be found if COIS looked hard enough. KK said that the IAGCI review could be used as a source and BT added that just because there is no information it doesn't mean there is no issue.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ MC asked why FCO letters are used. RT explained that they are requested by COIS when there are gaps in their knowledge. They are not a source in themselves but use local sources. BT informed the group that she had handed over UNHCR's comments on the report to COIS and that they had provided alternative sources. 	
<p>4.0 <u>IAGCI</u> <u>Commissioned</u> <u>Reviews:</u> <u>Uganda</u></p>	<p>KK summarised the Uganda review, written by AW, on behalf of the reviewer Stephen Kaduuli, who was unable to travel to the meeting from Canada. KK noted that the review was good.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ MC had looked at this review on behalf of the IAGCI and found it to be the least detailed of all the reviews. He felt that, whilst some points were valid, they would have been more powerful if backed up by more and better sources. ○ He also felt that COIS' responses were more satisfactory than in the other reviews considered at this meeting ○ Where COIS wanted to use the review as a source MC felt they should request that the reviewer extend the particular comment. ○ AW thought the review was helpful and would contact the reviewer for additional sources. ○ LH wanted to see more information about gender based violence against men, which has been extensively documented in the Uganda context. AW said she had encountered this in her report on DRC but struggled to know under what section to put the information. JS said that COIS are able to deal swiftly if there is a gap in terms of information, in a COI report. ○ The Group felt there was a case for COI Reports to contain information 	

	<p>even if not directly relevant to UK asylum claims at the moment, if there was clear evidence from experts that issues were currently arising in the country in question</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ BT said UNHCR had forwarded their comments to COIS but highlighted that the report contained a map from 2003 and that much had changed since then. 	
<p>5.0 <u>EASO</u></p>	<p>NH introduced himself. He has 6-7 years of COI experience gained from working in the COI unit in Austria which he headed. He now worked for the European Asylum Support Office and was responsible for COI within EASO.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ He gave an overview of the work he was involved in which included producing COI but COI that was more analytical, more detailed, and more issue-specific than is normally found in COI Reports. The first analytical report will be on Afghanistan. They aim to produce between 1 and 3 reports a year. ○ He said that there were 15 COI departments across the member states all with different approaches and no COI departments across the remaining 12 EU member states. The hope was to raise the standards in the member states where the COI was less evolved and help fill information gaps in other states. ○ EASO would also be able to assist COI departments in their fact finding missions in terms of accommodation, security etc. They would also be able to provide administrative support. ○ KK asked who the audience for the reports would be and NH explained that they were for decision makers. ○ KK asked JS how COIS would use the reports. JS explained that COIS had contributed to the report on Afghanistan but it was not clear how UKBA will use this and future reports ○ LH asked NH to give an example of the sort of analytical report EASO could produce. NH gave 	

	<p>the example of the treatment in Chechnya today of people who supported the uprising by using non-violent means in 2002.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ KK asked if EASO's work was demand-led. NH explained that the choices for the first 2 country reports were largely political, but that in future the countries and topics covered would be decided on the basis of consultation with relevant stakeholders. ○ A more general discussion followed surrounding EASO's work. LH asked if the reports would be reviewed independently. NH stated that EASO had set up a consultative forum which could have a similar brief to the IAGCI in that it could contain 4-5 material experts to conduct a peer review, but that these reviewers would, for the foreseeable future, be internally appointed. ○ CO asked how the reports would differ from an academic book about the same subject. NH explained that they are 'user-guided' and written for decision makers and not to be sold. MC asked if the reports would be available in all member languages. NH said this would not be possible. They would initially be produced in English but they were considering the possibility of translating them into French and German. ○ BT told the group that UNHCR sat on the Management Board at EASO and sat on the reference group for the COI section of EASO and as such were able to comment on methodology. ○ KK encouraged NH to promote the concept of an independent inspection for COI in the countries he visits on behalf of EASO. 	<p>7. IAGCI to invite NH back next year</p>
<p>6.0 <u>Operational Guidance Notes</u></p>	<p>Following on from the last meeting the group discussed whether the IAGCI were able to look at OGNs. This was in the context of UKBA's rejection of the Chief Inspector's recommendation in his report "the use of COI in deciding asylum application: A thematic inspection" that</p>	

	<p>OGN's be removed from COI.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ SH commented that if the IAGCI decide to look at OGNs then they should avoid making the same recommendation and try to look for a different angle. He added that JV would welcome a proposal from the IAGCI. JS thought that COIS would be happy to be scrutinised in this way but only if it would be beneficial to them. ○ KK suggested looking at one OGN with a narrow set of terms of reference. LH suggested reviewing an OGN with the corresponding COI report. The group agreed with this and KK will write to the Chief Inspector with a proposal that focused on looking at the COI contained in OGNs for the next three COI Reports under consideration by the Group. 	<p>8. KK to send proposal on OGN's to Chief Inspector</p>
<p>7.0 <u>COI report template</u></p>	<p>This agenda item was carried over from the last meeting. KK informed the group that whilst he had received the template from RT, it was too large a document to discuss at the meeting. He offered to look at it himself in time for the next meeting and email his thoughts to the group for their input.</p>	<p>9. KK to look at the COI template and email group with findings</p>
<p>8.0 <u>Women's Issues Checklist</u></p>	<p>This agenda item was also carried over from the last meeting. LH explained that she had been unable to look at this. LH wondered if any of the group wished to assist her and it was agreed that CO and AJ would do so.</p>	<p>10. LH, CO and AJ to look at a women's issues checklist based on recommendations of thematic review</p>
<p>9.0 <u>AOB</u></p>	<p>KK noted that there was not as many applications to review in this round of tenders as previously, and this affected his ability to select reviewers who could attend the meeting, which he felt was important in principle. LH thought something went wrong with the Forced Migration website. KK and LH agreed to widen the scope of IAGCI tenders.</p> <p>JS explained that the Sudan report had not yet been started but would be ready by October. The group agreed to look at Sudan in October and Sri Lanka would move to June.</p> <p>KK suggested that a panel member could review the bulletins and other ad hoc</p>	<p>11. KK and LH to try to widen scope of IAGCI tenders</p> <p>12. AM to amend work plan on website</p> <p>13. KK to think about</p>

	information that is used to update COI between the publications of COI Reports. The group agreed although JS started that clear terms of reference would be needed. KK said he would give the idea some more thought	whether to review interim information produced by COIS
<u>Next Meeting</u>	Tuesday 29th May 2012 2-5pm	