



**MINUTES ARISING FROM THE INDEPENDENT CHIEF INSPECTOR OF THE UKBA,  
INDEPENDENT ADVISORY GROUP ON COUNTRY INFORMATION (IAGCI) ON 1<sup>ST</sup>  
OCTOBER 2013**

**Venue:** 5<sup>th</sup> Floor, Globe House  
89 Eccleston Square  
London, SW1V 1PN

**Present:  
Members**

Laura Hammond ( <b>Chair</b> ) (LH)	- School of Oriental & African Studies
Andrew Jordan (AJ)	- First Tier Tribunal
Blanche Tax (BT)	- UNHCR (Geneva)
Elena Fiddian-Qasmiyeh (EFQ)	- University of Oxford
Harriet Short (HS)	- ILPA
Michael Collyer (MC)	- University of Sussex

**Representatives from ICIUKBA**

Stuart Harwood (SH)	- Independent Chief Inspector's office
Charmaine Figueira (CF)	- Independent Chief Inspector's office

**Representatives from COIS**

Robin Titchener (RT)	- Home Office
Andrew Saunders (AS)	- Home Office

**Commissioned reviewers**

Stephanie Huber (SHU)	- Syria Review
Dr Livia Holden (LHO)	- India Review
Vanessa Leigh (VL)	- Thematic on LGBTI

**Apologies:**

Patricia Daley (PD)	- University of Oxford
Ceri Oeppen (CO)	- University of Sussex
Heaven Crawley (HC)	- University Of Swansea

<b><u>Agenda Item</u></b>	<b><u>Issue</u></b>	<b><u>Action point</u></b>
<b>Introduction and welcome</b>	The chair welcomed everyone to the Chief Inspector's Independent Advisory Group on Country Information.	
<b>1. Chair's Report</b>	<p>LH offered congratulations to the previous chair of IAGCI, Khalid Koser, on his MBE awarded for services to refugees and asylum seekers. She said that it also represented a vote of recognition of the important work of the panel.</p> <p>MC had attended the Refugee and Asylum Forum (RAF) held on 31 October and reported on the content of the meeting. The meeting discussed the recently published inspections of Juxtaposed controls, E-borders, Tier 1 and Unaccompanied Asylum-Seeking Children. The RAF were also given an update on the workplan of the inspectorate including its work on Refusal Letters. This may have an impact on the work of the panel as they contain significant amounts of COI.</p> <p>There was also a presentation on Victims of Torture.</p> <p>SH informed the panel that the next meeting is tentatively scheduled for the 6<sup>th</sup> March and that he would confirm as soon as the date had been confirmed.</p> <p>LH informed the group that a review of the Zimbabwe COI Report and OGN had been commissioned, but because it was received very late, and given the full programme at today's meeting, the decision had been taken to delay discussion of the Zimbabwe review until the next meeting.</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. SH to confirm the date of the next RAF meeting to panel members.</li> <li>2. MC or HS to attend the next RAF meeting.</li> </ol>
<b>2. IAGCI Commissioned Reviews: Syria</b>	<p>LH introduced SHU the commissioned reviewer for the report on Syria.</p> <p>SHU thanked the panel for choosing Asylum Research Consultants (ARC) to undertake the review (which was written by SHU and her colleague Liz Williams). She also thanked the Home Office for their comments.</p> <p>SHU presented the main findings of her report.</p>	

	<p>All major recommendations/suggestions had been accepted by the HO to her satisfaction.</p> <p>SHU stated that the reports included accurate information. She supported the use of footnotes.</p> <p>SHU proposed that, due to the fast pace of the conflict situation the Syria reports should be updated on a more frequent basis. (It should be noted that a new Syria OGN was about to be released just after the date of this meeting, but was not ready in time to be reviewed, so the Syria OGN reviewed was from January 2013 and is thus largely out of date. Comments from that OGN will be applied to the update that is currently being prepared.)</p> <p>She made further comments on:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Treatment of detainees</li> <li>• Treatment of Women</li> <li>• Use of arbitrary arrest</li> <li>• Treatment of children in terms of both forced recruitment and trafficking</li> <li>• Fear of armed groups.</li> <li>• Forced recruitment.</li> </ul> <p>SHU reiterated that there is evidence of human rights abuses being committed by all conflict actors. There is specifically targeting of bloggers, citizens, journalists and human rights lawyers.</p> <p>SHU asked three further points:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Will the recommended changes be made to the report immediately or not until the next full refresh of the report? RT said that the incorrect references would be corrected quickly but major amendments would be done in due course.</li> <li>• The generalised format of the proposed new reports may not include all subsections currently in the report – is this intentional? RT advised that the reports are in a transition phase and will be shorter in the future with certain subsections being omitted. The new product will look similar to an OGN based on claim types.</li> <li>• It would have been helpful to review the ad-hoc bulletins and responses to information requests for Syria too and would this be possible in future. RT did not see there being an issue with publishing bulletins/responses to</li> </ul>	
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	<p>information requests.</p> <p>AJ agreed that all sources should be included and published. Although for the protection of individuals it may be necessary for some sources to remain anonymous and they can be used. The Tribunal recently ruled that anonymous sources can be used as evidence. However where possible sources should be named as a form of best practice.</p> <p>AJ raised the point about using incomplete quotations and how it could lead to a potential bias on a subject.</p> <p>AJ said that authors should take a step back when writing to see if the inclusion of the point is a fair reflection of the message that the source is attempting to convey, to be sure that direct quotations do not lose some of their intended meaning through being extracted.</p> <p>LH noted that this will be increasingly more important with the change of format of COI reports.</p> <p>BT raised the point of currency. Is the information current? It is difficult to deal with it in a country like Syria.</p> <p>She agreed that we need to also see the bulletins and briefings produced along with all the documents available at the time of the review to the decision makers. SH asked if we could review all the information available to the decision makers e.g. OGN, COI Report, Bulletins, and information requests/responses.</p> <p>BT also mentioned additional categories of claims. UNCHR are currently interviewing Syrian refugees in Jordan etc. They are not arriving in the UK as yet but can be expected to soon. Case profiles at COIS may not include the common grounds being claimed these people yet but they should. Could the changing profiles be looked at? AS replied that types that have not yet appeared in UK claims would not be included in this OGN and that they would have to look at the potential ways in which this could be achieved. He would also like the Syria report to be towards the front of the queue to be converted to the new product.</p> <p>EFQ said that Palestinians fleeing Syria should also be looked at. SHU asked if a nationality is</p>	
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	<p>present in another country should their information be included in both reports? E.g. if you are talking about a large amount of Iraqis in Syria could you mention them in both the Iraq and Syrian reports? AS replied that they should ideally be covered in both reports.</p>	
<p><b>3. IAGCI Commissioned Reviews: India</b></p>	<p>LH introduced LHO who reviewed the Indian OGN and COI report</p> <p>LHO presented her reviews. She thanked the HO for their comments and was grateful that the majority of her recommendations were accepted.</p> <p>She then discussed the points that were not accepted by the Home Office. She thought that maybe the scope of her suggestions was wider than what was required.</p> <p>LH then went through comments that had been submitted by email from CO:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The report looked thorough and provided COIS with information sources for future reports.</li> <li>• CO said that there was an interesting point about the possible greater use of legal documents.</li> <li>• She also made a general observation that the issue of diversity of sources is a recurring one that needs to be considered.</li> </ul>	
<p><b>4. IAGCI Commissioned Reviews: LGBTI Thematic</b></p>	<p>LH introduced VL the thematic reviewer of the LGBTI content of the COIS and OGN reports.</p> <p>VL gave an overview of her findings. She noted that sometimes there was little information on transgender and nothing on intersex issues.</p> <p>She suggested that 'Spartacus' should not be used as a source of information as it is meant to provide travel information rather than comment on the human rights situation in a given country.</p> <p>HS provided detailed feedback on the review. She saw that most recommendations had been accepted and that generally it was a positive exchange and a constructive process.</p> <p>HS wondered about countries that were not included in the top 20 countries that COIS report on. How are they dealt with? Could anything be suggested in generic terms?</p> <p>HS noted that a dearth of sources on LGBTI issues does not necessarily mean a claim is unfounded. Can this be made explicit in COI reports? RT said that this would be considered.</p> <p>There was some discussion about a point made</p>	

	<p>on page 22 regarding the situation (e.g. in Afghanistan) where men have sex with young boys. The reviewer argued that this was not about same sex relationships but more about cultural acceptances and taboos, as well as about adults having sex with children who may be underage (and thus be an issue of child protection) and argued that this should not be included when providing COI material on homosexuality.</p> <p>It was suggested that the issue of men with younger boys could be looked at in the context of prosecution or persecution. Also the age of consent issue is relevant and how permissive a country is about the allowance of the expression of sexual identity below the age of consent.</p> <p>HS agreed with the VL's comments on the use of Spartacus. She could see the benefit of using conflicting sources but the credibility of the source has to be considered. Spartacus is a holiday guide for gay travellers, and what a holiday maker can do in a country may well differ from what a citizen of that country can do.</p> <p>It was pointed out that guidance on how to cover Intersex issues was not included on the COIS template. It is important that, if we refer to LGBTI that we consider L, G, B, T and I. If we only refer to LGBT we should only describe it as LGBT etc. If no information on a certain group has been found this finding should be included.</p> <p>EFQ asked if "Asexual" individuals should be considered as well? She gave an example of where such a person might have an asylum claim e.g. someone being forced into an arranged marriage who did not wish to marry.</p> <p>RT responded that such claims were not common and were thus not likely to be addressed as a matter of course, but might be dealt with in information requests.</p> <p>AJ stated that it was important to recognise the importance of these thematic reviews. It's a very good way of deciding whether COI is good. Where there has been a previous report there is a direct opportunity to see whether COIS have acted on things. Therefore the thematic review is very useful.</p> <p>MC asked how the new format of report would work with the thematic reviews? He suggested that the Chief Inspector should be made aware of the importance of the thematic cross-reviews and the need to continue them even with the changing</p>	<p>3. BT to liaise with RT over template</p>
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	<p>format of COI products.</p> <p>EFQ pointed out that Statelessness should also be considered as a thematic. LH noted that statelessness is one of the thematic reviews that the group has planned to commission in the future.</p>	
<p><b>5. IAGCI New Work Process</b></p>	<p>LH presented a draft Invitation to Tender (ITT) and Terms of Reference for commissioning future reviews. Such a revision is necessary given the changing nature of COI products and to accommodate the new structure that was presented to the group at its Special Meeting on Dec. 20, 2013 with Philip Duffy when he presented proposed new product format from COIS with the Kuwait report as an example.</p> <p>SH advised that the ITT should be trialled it to see if works with the new product.</p> <p>LH said that one concerns with the new product was that the level of payment for the reviews would differ dependent on the size and detail of the report being reviewed. For example Kuwait was a more narrowly focused report and so the reviewer would not be expected to command the same level of payment as the reviewer of a more complex country report such as Somalia.</p> <p>MC raised an issue with point 4v of the paper (relating to commenting on the extent to which policy positions were supported by the country of origin information presented). It would be difficult to expect the reviewers to discuss policy without commenting on whether or not they agreed with the policy. SH stated that JV could not comment on policy. AJ also said that he could not comment on policy as it would compromise his role as a judge. It was agreed to remove this point from the tender.</p> <p>SHU asked if it was clear to tell what was background and what was policy in the new product. SH said that from the example in December it was clear.</p> <p>LH said that it would be helpful to look at all the information products for the country being reviewed. Both MC and SH agreed, but members agreed that given the challenges of reviewing a new kind of report, the focus should be on that, and that the group would consider how best to manage review of information request responses at its next meeting. LH asked</p>	<p><b>4.</b> LH to delete point 4 v</p> <p><b>5.</b> All relevant information to be included in the review. Including information request responses.</p> <p><b>6.</b> RT to provide some examples of Information request responses for the April meeting</p>

	RT if he could provide some examples of information request responses for the next meeting so that the group could assess how best to incorporate them into a country review.	
<b>6. AOB</b>	LH confirmed the next countries to be reviewed would be Zimbabwe and the new style products on Somalia and Kuwait. RT said that the Somali report would be ready within the next two weeks and he would make it available to LH as soon as it is ready.	7. RT to send final drafts of both Somalia and Kuwait reports as soon as they are ready.
<b>7. Next Meeting</b>	The next meeting will take place 8 <sup>th</sup> April 2014 at 14.00 – 17.00.	.