

‘Hotel protests give our kids flashbacks’

Portsmouth’s two bishops said they were ashamed of those promoting fear and misinformation about asylum seekers

WHEN Abram and his family hear protesters chanting outside the Royal Beach Hotel, they instantly have flashbacks to what happened in their home country.

They fled from the Middle East because protesters were surrounding Abram’s store and threatening to burn it down. He was imprisoned for more than a month and tortured because of his Christian faith.

Abram, his wife Jasmin, and their sons Jozof, 8, and Karter, 6,* sold everything they had, boarded a flight to the UK and claimed asylum as soon as they landed. They were placed in the Royal Beach Hotel in Southsea nine months ago, but the Home Office has not conducted a single interview with them since.

“It is a real problem for my wife and for my son Jozof, because we had the same situation in our home country,” he said. “People tried to attack our store and wanted to burn it down, because we are Christians. There was a lot of noise then. So when we heard the chanting outside the hotel, my son ran into his room and hid under the bed.

“It was like a flashback and he started to remember what used to happen. We had told my son that we would find a safe place to live, but now he is worried again that we



Children are left terrified by protesters outside their hotels; top right: Shamila Dhana from Portsmouth City of Sanctuary speaks at our Diocesan Synod

will have the same kind of problems as before.

“The protesters seem to believe that all asylum seekers are bad. I’m sure there are bad people who claim asylum, but there are good people too of all nationalities. They should not assume that we are all the same.

“They think we are living in luxury, but it is an awful life. We are not allowed to work, and we have to stay in the hotel most of the time – our boys would like to be out playing football. We are forbidden to have visitors, which I don’t understand – even people in prison are allowed visitors.

“We are given an allowance of £8 a week, and we are given food that has been reheated or sandwiches. We are grateful for it, of course, but my children aren’t used to some of the spicy food we are given. My wife is also pregnant and her tastes have changed, so we can’t always eat it.

“It is frustrating too, because we applied for asylum legally and did everything we were supposed to do. But nothing has happened, not one interview from the Home Office.

“There is no consistency either. Some people arrive and are interviewed and hear about their status quickly, and some have been waiting even longer than we have.



“We just don’t know what is happening, and our lives are on hold. I would love to be working and paying taxes, and for no one to be giving me money or food. None of us in the hotel want to be there, and sorting out our status would be good for the Home Office, and would mean this hotel would be empty.”

Abram and his family have found friendship and support at St Simon’s Church in Southsea. They attend worship there and volunteer to help with activities when they can.

Abram said: “The people at this church are like our family. I was born a Christian, so I know that church is a place where people are welcomed. We bring any spare food we have to share with the homeless or others. We try to do what Jesus would have done.”

The vicar, the Rev Jackie Twine, said: “We are privileged to have this family as part of our congregation. They don’t have much, but always turn up with something to share with others. They cannot work, but will often volunteer to help.”

Among the organisations helping asylum seekers such as Abram are Portsmouth City of Sanctuary, which run a drop-in centre in All Saints, Commercial Road, and the Kitchen of Hope in St Simon’s Church, Southsea. Chair of trustees Shamila Dhana shared some of this work with our Diocesan Synod in November. See: www.portsmouth.anglican.org/refugee for details.

* the names of the family have been changed.

Bishops speak out on asylum protests

PORTSMOUTH’s two bishops issued a statement on immigration and asylum in the wake of protests outside a Southsea hotel.

Bishop Jonathan and Bishop Philip Egan, Roman Catholic Bishop of Portsmouth, pointed out that children were among those left intimidated within the Royal Beach Hotel.

The statement from the two bishops reads as follows:

“As the Roman Catholic and Church of England Bishops of Portsmouth, we are honoured to serve a city which has as its emblem ‘Heaven’s Light Our Guide’.

“Each day we seek the light and guidance of God for daily living. We listen closely to our scriptures and seek wisdom from our Christian heritage. We listen to the cry of the most vulnerable in our city. We find the teaching of Jesus difficult but always life-giving.

“We cherish our city’s long history of hospitality to strangers, refugees and asylum seekers. But we are concerned that our city’s well-deserved reputation for compassion is under threat from those promoting fear and misinformation about our most vulnerable neighbours.

“We have been truly ashamed by recent events in our city that involve the intimidation, blaming and scapegoating of asylum seekers and refugees. We are horrified when protestors use Christian language to justify divisive chants. We are aware that more than 20 children currently live in the Royal Beach Hotel in Southsea. Here families live in fear as protesters chant crude slogans outside the hotel.

“We understand the real

concerns and fears about immigration, including the perception that it adds to pressures on already stretched welfare and NHS systems.

“It is a complex problem that needs to be sorted out, but it requires a long-term solution, not a short-term quick fix or scapegoating. Every refugee or asylum seeker is a person with a name and a story to tell and we must remember they have often fled from truly desperate situations.

“Jesus Christ modelled care for the outcast and marginalised. His gospel calls us to love our neighbour, including care for the stranger. We are called to build bridges, not walls. Indeed, Jesus identified himself with the stranger such that to care for a stranger is to care for him (Matthew 25 v35).

“The light of faith prompts Christians to support asylum seekers and refugees, as well as the homeless, the poorest and the oldest in our communities. That compassionate approach is rooted in a regard for the sanctity of all human life, which is the bedrock of our shared faith.

“A humane way forward demands informed engagement, meeting asylum seekers, and pressing politicians for real reform, backed by cross-agency, cross-party and international collaboration to deliver a fair, long-term solution.

“We call on our own Christian communities, people of all faiths and none, to seek a just and kind solution, and to take practical steps towards understanding and supporting those in need. Let us commit ourselves to doing that which truly makes a difference.”