

## Advisory Panel on Country Information

Minutes of 6th Meeting held on 8 March 2006 at  
Chatham House, 10 St James's Square, London SW1 Y4L

### **Present**

Dr Khalid Koser (Chair)	Migration Research Unit, University College London (on secondment to the Global Commission on International Migration)
Mr Gottfried Zuercher	International Centre for Migration Policy Development
Ms Ana Fonseca	International Organisation for Migration
Ms Anna Reisenberger	The Refugee Council
Dr Alan Ingram	The Royal Geographical Society
Dr Rosemary Hollis	The Royal Institute for International Affairs
Mr Oldrich Andrysek	United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, Protection Information Section
Ms Alia Al Khatar	United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, London Office

### Secretariat

Mr Nick Swift	COI Service Home Office
Mr Eugenio Bosco	COI Service Home Office

### Observers

Mr Chris Attwood	COI Service Home Office
Mr Jonathan Wolstenholme	Foreign and Commonwealth Office
Ms Shahida Khan	Foreign and Commonwealth Office
Ms Jan Shaw	Amnesty International
Dr Jonathan Ensor	Immigration Advisory Service
Ms Jane Shenton	Medecins sans Frontières
Mr Nick Oakeshott	Refugee Legal Centre
Prof Arnold Hughes	Independent consultant
Mr Nadim Shehadi	Royal Institute for International Affairs
Ms Martha Walsh	Independent consultant

### Apologies

Prof Gil Loescher	Centre for International Studies, RSC University of Oxford
Prof Lord Bhikhu Parekh	Centre for the Study of Democracy, University of Westminster
Mr Charles Radcliffe	International Crisis Group
Mr Andrew Jordan	The Asylum and Immigration Tribunal

## **Item 1- Introduction**

1.1 The Chair welcomed those present. He said that he was very pleased to have been appointed Chair for an initial period of two years and would ask the Home Office to say a few words about the appointment process. The meeting would also want to take time to acknowledge the important contribution of his predecessor Professor Stephen Castles in establishing the Panel.

1.2 Before discussing these issues, Dr Koser welcomed those who had not previously attended a Panel meeting: Dr Alan Ingram of University College London, who had replaced Professor Richard Black as the representative for the Royal Geographical Society; Ms Ana Fonseca of the International Organisation for Migration, who was standing in for Jan de Wilde; Dr Jonathan Ensor, representing the Immigration Advisory Service; Mr Nick Oakeshott, representing the Refugee Legal Centre; and Mr Eugenio Bosco from the Home Office.

1.3 Dr Koser also welcomed some of the researchers who had reviewed the Country of Origin Information Reports for this meeting: Professor Arnold Hughes who examined the draft report for Gambia; Mr Nadim Shehadi who looked at Lebanon; and Ms Martha Walsh who provided commentary on Sierra Leone.

1.4 In view of the presence of new observers, the Chair briefly explained the role of observers at Panel meetings. Observers were welcome to participate in the discussions, but would not be part of any decisions or recommendations made by the Panel. The approach taken thus far had been very informal and there were no rules of procedure regarding observers. This approach had worked so far, but would be kept under review.

1.6 The Chair also reminded those present of the Panel's function, which he said was very specific – i.e. to consider and provide advice on the Home Office's country of origin information (COI) material. Although COI had a crucial role in the asylum process, it was not part of Panel's role to discuss wider asylum issues.

1.7 Dr Koser said it may be helpful for members to hear about the process by which he was appointed as Chair. Professor Castles had announced at the meeting a year ago that he intended to step down, but because of the need to satisfy the requirements of the Office of the Commissioner for Public Appointments (OCPA), an external recruitment exercise had to be undertaken. He invited Mr Attwood to speak about the process.

1.8 Mr Attwood said that as the Panel was classified as an advisory Non Departmental Public Body, it was subject to guidelines set down by the Commissioner for Public Appointments, whose office regulates and monitors ministerial appointments to public bodies to ensure that they are made on merit after fair and open competition.

1.9 The appointment process used to appoint the new Chair had been agreed and overseen by an OCPA accredited independent assessor to ensure that it was open and transparent and followed the OCPA Code of Practice for Public Appointments. The advertising, application forms, records of sifting, notes of interviews and recommendations to ministers all had to be agreed by the independent assessor. The independent assessor also took part in the sift process, together with Dr Gary Raw, Head of RDS-IND. Although this made for a lengthy process, the checks and balances were important to ensure the integrity and fairness of the appointment.

1.10 The position of Chair was advertised on the APCI website; the Forced Migration List; the website of the Human Rights Centre at the University of Essex; and the Cabinet Office website. Six applications were received from strong candidates and three were interviewed. Probably one of the key factors that made Dr Koser the successful candidate was his experience as a member, researcher and Deputy Chair of the Panel and the continuity this would bring. Minister Tony McNulty was very pleased to appoint him for an initial period of two years.

1.11 The Chair noted that a similar process would be followed for recruiting additional independent members for the Panel. The legislation specified that there should be between 10 and 20 members of the Panel; and OCPA guidance recommended that there should be a 50/50 balance between organisational members and 'independent' individuals. There were currently eight organisational members and, with Professor Castles leaving, only three independent members. This made it necessary to recruit five additional independent members. The process of recruitment would be initiated shortly and members would be asked to suggest suitable candidates who could be invited to apply.

1.12 The Chair confirmed that the appointments of original members had now been renewed for an additional two years.

1.13 The Chair said that members would wish to formally acknowledge the very important contribution that Professor Castles had made to the work of the Panel. As the Panel's first Chair, he had taken a key role in establishing the Panel, setting its direction, developing its working methods and representing its views to Ministers.

1.14 The Chair said that when the Panel was first set up, some were sceptical about its value, fearing that it might be just a 'rubber stamping' exercise for the Government and that it would not have a genuinely independent voice. However, given the membership of the Panel and with Professor Castles as the Chair, this was never likely. Professor Castles knew that the Panel's credibility relied upon it being seen to be effective. Fortunately, Ministers also understood this and the Home Office had been very receptive and responsive to the Panel's advice.

1.15 In particular, on the Panel's recommendation, the Home Office has made some fundamental organisational changes to separate COI from policy

and place it within the research area of the Home Office. And with each successive meeting of the Panel there have been continued improvements in the quality of the Home Office's COI material. So the Panel has clearly been effective.

1.16 The Chair noted that the Panel has also won respect for the transparent way that it works. All its papers are published on the website; and the Panel's discussions are clearly recorded in the minutes of the meetings, exposing the forthright comments of members and observers to public view. He said that, in general, the Panel is a very good model for how a body of its kind should operate; and a large share of the credit for its success should go to Professor Castles.

1.17 On behalf of the Panel, the Chair expressed thanks to Professor Castles for his very valuable contribution as its first chair and very best wishes for his future career.

1.18 The Chair then suggested some minor changes to the terms of reference of the Panel to take account of the fact that COI Service had replace CIPU, to incorporate the term *country of origin information*; and to generally make the wording a bit tighter. *[The existing Terms of Reference and proposed amended version were tabled]*

1.19 Mr Zuercher said that the Panel was a unique body, and that there was nothing comparable in any other country. As such, the Panel potentially had a valuable role to play in contributing to the development of common standards for the production of COI material, in the context of EU initiatives flowing from the Hague Process. He suggested that this 'European dimension' should be reflected in the terms of reference.

1.20 Ms Reisenberger noted that the Panel had begun to look at the issue of gender in COI and she welcomed the Home Office's engagement on this matter. In general, the UK was ahead of most European countries in addressing gender in the asylum context. Guidelines on gender should be included in any common standards for COI.

1.21 The Chair asked that revised draft Terms of Reference, reflecting these points, be circulated with the minutes.

## **Item 2 - APCI evaluation of COI Reports**

2.1 The Chair reminded members that at the last meeting the Home Office had requested that the Panel look at the COI material for Gambia, Lebanon, Malawi and Sierra Leone, because these countries were being considered for possible NSA status. These were not 'top 20' asylum intake countries and would not ordinarily have COI Reports, so draft reports had been produced on them from scratch. The Panel had also been requested to do a follow-up evaluation on the Turkey Report because it too might be considered for NSA designation.

2.2 The Chair briefly reminded members of the Panel's role in relation to the NSA process. The Government has given a commitment to Parliament that the COI material for any countries being proposed for the Non Suspensive Appeals (NSA) list should be reviewed by the Panel before any designation order was made. However, it was important to note that the Panel has absolutely no role in relation to the decision whether or not a country should be added to the NSA list. Its function is simply to examine and comment on the Home Office's country of origin information and it makes no difference whether the country concerned is NSA or not. APCI researchers are not informed of the NSA context of their work.

2.3 The Chair said that the Home Office had asked that the fact that these countries were being considered for NSA status should be kept confidential, fearing this information could trigger an increase in asylum applications before any designation provisions came into effect. The Home Office had asked that the minutes should simply say that the countries concerned were considered at the Home Office's request, without explicitly stating the reason. The Chair noted that the reason could easily be deduced by anyone referring back to the minutes of the previous meeting, but asked if members would agree to the Home Office's request.

2.4 Professor Hughes asked for an explanation of the non-suspensive appeals process. Mr Swift said that he was not in a position to give a detailed explanation but briefly explained that the term 'non-suspensive appeals' referred to the fact that the right of appeal for asylum applicants did not suspend removal and could only be exercised from their country of origin. Although the NSA list was sometimes inaccurately called a 'safe country list', countries did not need to be 'safe' for everyone in order to be designated, and all asylum applications from NSA countries were treated on their individual merits.

2.5 The Chair said it would be helpful for members to have a brief guide to the NSA process, and asked for this to be circulated with the minutes.

2.6 Mr Andrysek said that UNHCR has always respected confidentiality when members had been asked not to mention the NSA aspect in the past. However, there has been no evidence of an increase in intake immediately prior to designation of countries for NSA and he felt that withholding this information would be incompatible with the transparent way that the Panel operates. He would therefore prefer it to be reflected in the minutes.

2.7 Ms Hollis suggested that it may also be appropriate for APCI researchers to be told about the NSA context of their work. Mr Swift said that they were not told because this aspect was irrelevant to their task of reviewing the COI material and might be a distracting factor.

2.8 Ms Walsh said that as a researcher she would like to have been informed about the NSA context and saw this as important background information. Mr Swift asked if knowing about it would have affected any of the

content of her report. She said not, but that NSA was a policy that researchers might have strong feelings about and may affect their decision as to whether to take on the project. Mr Shehadi and Professor Hughes both said that as researchers they would like to have known about the NSA aspect.

2.9 Ms Reisenberger commented that the Panel's role in relation to NSA was a significant aspect of its work and should be reflected in its terms of reference. She also said that in order to be transparent and respect the ethical position of researchers, they should be told of the full context of their work. Mr Ingram endorsed this position, from the perspective of an academic researcher.

2.10 Summing up the discussion, the Chair said the following points had been agreed:

- In future, researchers commissioned by the Panel would be informed if the country concerned was being considered for NSA status;
- the Panel's role in relation to NSA would be reflected in the terms of reference;
- the Home Office would provide a brief explanation of the NSA process to be circulated to members;
- and, because of the need to maintain transparency, the Panel would not agree to the Home Office's request to omit the reference to NSA from the minutes.

2.11 For the benefit of those new to Panel meetings, the Chair briefly explained the process by which individual COI Reports are examined by the Panel. As members of the Panel do not have the resources or country expertise to consider the material in detail themselves, researchers are commissioned to review each COI Report looked at by the Panel and produce an evaluation paper, bringing out the main findings. The Home Office then has the opportunity to respond. Most researchers are qualified to PhD level and are chosen for their knowledge of the country concerned.

2.12 At the last meeting, the Home Office had suggested that as the COI Reports on Gambia, Lebanon, Malawi and Sierra Leone had to be written from scratch, they could be submitted to APCI researchers at draft stage. This would allow the researchers' comments to be taken on board and any amendments made before publication. The researchers' papers to the Panel would then note both the initial problems found and the extent to which they had been remedied in the final products.

2.13 Members had agreed to trying try this approach as a pilot, but had raised some concerns about the need to ensure transparency and separation in the process, so that the Panel did not become too closely involved in the production of the reports.

2.14 As before, the Home Office had annotated responses to the researchers' individual comments directly onto the researchers' evaluation papers. In some cases, the researcher had responded with further annotations.

2.15 The Chair said that he would invite the researchers to briefly introduce their evaluation papers in turn; he would then ask Chris Attwood to respond on behalf of the Home Office.

### **Gambia (APCI.6.1)**

2.15 The draft Gambia COI Report had been reviewed by Professor Arnold Hughes, formerly of the Centre of African Studies, Birmingham University. The Chair thanked Professor Hughes for coming to the meeting and invited him to introduce his paper.

2.16 Professor Hughes said that the COI Service researcher had produced a very workmanlike first draft and he was impressed by the diligence and thoroughness with which the task had been approached. The draft provided a balanced account of the stated aims of human rights institutions and laws and the actual practice, which was often at odds with these. For example, Gambia had a model constitution but this was sometimes overridden by military decrees.

2.17 Professor Hughes said that as the research for the report had been very thorough, his comments had served to supplement rather than correct it. Most of his suggestions had been incorporated and the reasons for not including the others had been explained to his satisfaction. He said that the report could not be faulted within the constraints of its remit: it was thorough and extensive, and would be very helpful to those working in the asylum system. He was therefore happy to give it his imprimatur.

2.18 Having acted as an expert witness in support of appellants at asylum appeals, Professor Hughes welcomed the openness of the COI Service research team and the process undertaken to ensure that the material provided an impartial, 'rounded approach'.

2.19 Professor Hughes noted some limitations of the Gambia report:

- It relied upon web-based sources and it was not always possible to get the full picture from internet research. He had provided some additional material from academic sources that had subsequently been incorporated into the report.
- The approach of using quotes from sources without commentary made it difficult for the reader to get a narrative flow. It also made it difficult to highlight contradictions. He suggested that the methodology for presenting COI Reports could be reviewed.
- Limiting material included to sources less than two years old could exclude some important information, which may be useful for providing background to recent events. Similarly, having a fixed cut-off date for

the inclusion of new information could exclude important developments and restrict the ability to make the report current.

- There did not appear to be any criteria for the entries in the annex on prominent people, with some relatively obscure people included and other, more significant, people omitted.

2.20 Mr Andrysek said that UNHCR had provided written comments on the Gambia report (APCI.6.9). He noted that the process whereby academic experts provided input at draft stage was very effective and had further enhanced the quality of the reports.

### **Lebanon (APCI.6.2)**

2.21 The draft Lebanon COI Report had been evaluated by Mr Nadim Shehadi of Chatham House. Mr Shehadi said that he concurred with much of what Dr Hughes had said, as the same principles applied to the Lebanon report.

2.22 Mr Shehadi agreed with Dr Hughes's comments on sources: ie. that it was sometimes important to use sources older than two years in order to provide context; and that some important material was not available on the internet. He had worked closely with the COI Service researcher, meeting with her on more than one occasion, and had suggested additional source material which had been included.

2.23 Mr Shehadi thought that the standard structure of the COI Report made it difficult to access key information on asylum issues. In order to evaluate the report he had made a list of what he knew to be the main issues arising in asylum applications and then looked for them in the report. As asylum issues were very specific to each country, he thought the reports should be structured around these rather than using general categories.

2.24 Mr Shehadi thought that the task of producing the report was made difficult by the timing of it: huge changes had taken place during the past year and were still in process, the implications of which were not yet clear. It was therefore difficult to find sources to reflect the situation adequately. This was compounded by the inability of COI Service to make use of sources in foreign languages. Given these constraints, certain issues had had to be covered in quite vague terms. As a consequence, the report was accurate and complete, but not wholly comprehensive in some areas.

2.25 Ms Reisenberger asked about the criteria for obtaining translations of source material. Mr Attwood said that translations were arranged when COI Service had a clear indication that the value of the document justified the expense. In general, the difficulty for COI Service was in knowing which documents were worth translating and any suggestions from the Panel on this would be welcome.

2.26 Mr Andrysek suggested that more UN sources could be used in the Lebanon report, particularly regarding Palestinians who move out of UNWRA territory. There were UNHCR guidelines on this issue which might usefully be included. Mr Shehadi said that the inclusion of such material would be made much easier if the report could be re-structured around the key issues.

2.27 Mr Zuercher said that all countries give rise to their own particular set of main asylum issues, but there are practical advantages to having a standard structure for all COI Reports. It might therefore be useful to produce separate factsheets on country-specific issues.

2.28 The Chair noted that addressing both the universal and the country-specific in an accessible way was one of the key challenges in taking forward any changes to the standard structure of the reports.

### **Malawi (APCI.6.3)**

2.29 The Chair said that the draft Malawi COI Report had been evaluated by Dr Gudrun Haraldsdottir, an independent consultant who had conducted a year long research project in Malawi and had lived there for several years. He said that her paper included her comments on the initial draft and the second draft which had incorporated her suggested amendments. As Dr Haraldsdottir was not able to be at the meeting, the Chair read out an extract from the 'Final Comments' section of her paper.

This report has evaluated draft versions of the Home Office Country of Origin Information Report on Malawi. Overall the report was found to give an accurate general picture of Malawi and its human rights situation, and the use of sources was found to be fair and unbiased (no evidence of systematic distortion or biased use of quotes was found). Some suggestions to improve the original draft were made, mainly to add further or more updated information, as well as to increase use of online sources from Malawi. These suggestions were all attended to in the amended draft and improvements were made.

### **Sierra Leone (APCI.6.4)**

2.30 The Chair said that the draft Sierra Leone COI Report had been evaluated by Ms Martha Walsh, an independent consultant, and Dr Richard Fanthorpe of Sussex University. He thanked Ms Walsh for coming to the meeting and invited her to introduce the paper.

2.31 Ms Walsh said that she is a barrister by profession and had been assisted in the evaluation by Dr Fanthorpe, an academic with detailed knowledge of Sierra Leone. Like the other researchers, Dr Fanthorpe had commented on the heavy reliance on internet sources. As a practitioner, Ms Walsh was personally less concerned about this issue, because there was often limited time for preparing cases and it was very helpful to be able to access the material on the internet.

2.32 As a practitioner, Ms Walsh also took a different view from that expressed by other researchers on the issue of lack of analysis in the reports. She thought it was safer to rely on the existing approach whereby the information was presented as a series of extracts from source material as this minimised the risk of opinion entering the reports. She said that the process whereby experts were invited to comment at draft stage was very effective. However, if analysis was to be included in the reports it may be necessary to get experts to actually write them.

2.33 Ms Walsh said that compared to earlier editions, the Sierra Leone report had improved beyond recognition - there had been a 'sea change' in approach and the professionalism of the COI Service researchers was to be commended. In particular, she welcomed the addition of material on mental health and the inclusion of the UNHCR position paper, which was very useful and the kind of document that could be difficult for practitioners to access.

2.34 Ms Walsh said that she had had some concerns about the completeness of the first draft and the initial approach taken towards gender issues, but these had been substantially remedied in the revised version. She had also suggested the inclusion of some specific examples to illustrate cases which highlighted exceptions to the 'general rule' on a particular issue. She noted that some of the internet sources required password access and that no annexes were attached with the Sierra Leone report.

2.35 Summing up, Ms Walsh said that some issues of style remained in the final version of the report but that she was satisfied with the content. In general, she applauded the researchers for a much improved document.

2.36 Mr Andrysek noted that UNHCR had provided some new information on Sierra Leone in their compilation of comments (APCI.6.9).

## **Turkey**

**(APCI.6.5)**

2.36 The Chair said that the Turkey COI Report (which was not a draft, but had been published in December 2005) had been evaluated by Haleh Chahrokh of ICMPD. He invited Mr Zuercher to introduce the paper.

2.37 Mr Zuercher said that the evaluation of the Turkey report had been a follow-up to the assessment carried out by Professor Kemal Kirisci for the last meeting. In general, the Turkey report was one of the best and most comprehensive reports that had been looked at; the breadth and depth of coverage of the major issues was excellent.

2.38 There were some possible areas for improvement, including:

- a large number of typos and minor errors which suggested the need to improve proof reading;
- the use of cross references, though good, could be extended;

- the basic restriction to the use of English language sources was limiting; and
- as noted by other researchers, the selection of names for the list of prominent people seemed arbitrary.

## **Home Office response**

**(APCI.6.6)**

2.39 The Chair said that the Home Office had annotated the researchers' evaluation papers with responses to each individual comment made. In addition, the Home Office had provided a paper commenting more generally on the findings of the researchers and the new process that was piloted for all the reports except Turkey. He invited Mr Attwood to introduce the paper, respond to comments made in discussion and also speak about any developments in COI Service's products and procedures.

2.40 Mr Attwood began by acknowledging how valuable the APCI process was to COI Service. There has been considerable progress in the past couple of years, but there is still room for improvement in some areas and it is likely that there will always be scope for further development.

2.41 Commenting on the pilot process used to evaluate the draft COI Reports, he said that it has clearly been very effective in producing high quality products. Also, the COI Service researchers have found the dialogue with country experts a very useful and stimulating experience. However, it has become clear that this process will not be feasible for the APCI evaluation of the 'top 20' asylum intake countries, as there simply will not be sufficient time within the publication schedules.

2.42 Mr Attwood said that COI Service intends to build upon the positive experience of working closely with academic experts by establishing direct contacts with country specialists for each of the 'top 20' countries. These experts will provide advice to the COI researchers on the content of their reports, suggest additional sources and give guidance on matters such as when to translate foreign language documents.

2.43 Mr Attwood noted the Panel's comments regarding the annex on prominent people and said that standard criteria for inclusion of names will be established. He also noted the comments regarding the structure of the reports and said that this is being reviewed and will be revised after the April edition. He thought there will probably still be a need for a standard structure to provide consistency for the main headings, but with flexibility for individual variations as appropriate.

2.44 On the issue of over-reliance upon internet sources, he said that COI Service is looking to extend the range of academic sources used and this aspect is being explored with the Home Office library services. The contacts with country specialists will also facilitate this.

2.45 Mr Attwood said that he is looking at methodologies for evaluating data sources and exploring whether it may be possible to adapt social science research techniques for this purpose. This might be particularly helpful for the presentation of inconsistent information and giving weight to sources. He was in discussion with Defence Intelligence Service and other organisations to see whether any of their methods could be useful.

2.46 Regarding the timing of COI Reports, Mr Attwood acknowledged that the cut-off dates for material sometimes can mean excluding useful information, but there has to be some 'end point' or the reports would never be published. However, Mr Attwood said that COI Service is looking at the possibility of developing a system of updating the reports on a more frequent basis and he hoped to be in a position to say more about this at the next meeting.

2.47 Mr Attwood noted the comments on the lack of 'analysis' or commentary in the COI Reports. This issue needs to be addressed in a way that ensures the reports remain free of subjectivity and interpretation. Indeed, part of the reason for the COI function being transferred to RDS was to ensure the accuracy and objectivity of the material. One of the key ways of doing so is by training.

2.48 Mr Attwood said that one of the difficulties in developing a suitable training package is in finding examples of best practice, because the UK is generally considered to be one of the leaders in the field of COI. Considerable progress had been made in developing a training pack tailored to the needs of COI Service researchers last year, but it has become clear that it will be more practical to adapt the COI training course developed by ACCORD and the COI network. Members of the team were going to meet the ACCORD trainers the following week to discuss this, with a view to delivering the training during the summer.

2.49 Mr Attwood thanked UNHCR and AIT for agreeing to take part in the training as initially conceived. Although their contributions could not be incorporated into the ACCORD training, they would still be very useful in the form of individual seminars to COI Service staff and he would be in touch to discuss this possibility.

2.50 The Chair thanked Mr Attwood and invited further discussion.

2.51 Dr Hollis said she was somewhat bemused by Mr Attwood's suggestion of establishing a qualitative test for evaluating information sources. She thought this was an extremely difficult and ambitious enterprise; but one that, if successful, could be very valuable in the light of the challenges to sound research that had come with increased use of the internet.

2.53 Mr Attwood thought that it was well worth exploring whether social science methodologies could be adapted for use in the field of COI. Existing standard systems such as Campbell and Cochran were prescriptive and

clearly unsuitable but it may be possible to draw upon them to develop a workable model.

2.54 Mr Ingram advised caution in seeking to use 'hard science' techniques for COI research. These had been rehearsed in the area of geography and found not to be easily applicable.

2.55 Mr Andrysek said that the ACCORD electronic COI training manual will provide an excellent basis for the training for COI Service. UNHCR has contributed funding for the development of the ACCORD initiative, which he hoped will help to reduce the duplication of effort and waste of resources in the field of COI across European states.

2.56 Mr Andrysek noted that Home Office reports are used far beyond the UK's jurisdiction – partly because they are in English and because 40 reports are issued per year. This lends added importance to the role of the Panel and its role in considering and advising on methodologies and standards. He noted that Austria has recently established a body which has some similarities to the Panel, but on a more modest scale.

2.57 Mr Andrysek said that one simple improvement he would suggest for the reports would be the use of footnotes. Mr Attwood said that this is being considered in the current review.

2.58 Mr Andrysek said that COI Reports are of a high quality but there are some striking inconsistencies in the content of the COI Reports and Operational Guidance Notes (OGNs): an example was given in the UNHCR comments on the Turkey report. Mr Andrysek said he accepted that OGNs are not a matter for the Panel, but it is important to realise that COI is not a solution to ensuring sound asylum decisions in isolation.

2.59 The Chair noted that when Professor Castles had discussed the issue of OGNs with Home Office Minister Des Browne, he had been advised that a mechanism was being established whereby UNHCR would have the opportunity to comment on OGNs. He asked if any progress has been made on this. Ms Al Khatar said that UNHCR is looking at how the mechanism should operate; in particular, whether consultation should take place before or after publication.

2.60 Mr Zuercher commented that the Austrian panel mentioned by Mr Andrysek (of which he is also a member) is very different from the APCI. The Austrian Panel started earlier this year. Its composition is largely government orientated and it cannot be said to be independent in the manner of the APCI. Also, its mandate is much broader.

2.61 Mr Zuercher said he agreed with Mr Andrysek's comments about the duplication and overlap within the EU in terms of collecting COI. He thought there is considerable scope to make progress on establishing common standards and methodologies in this area.

### **Item 3 - Other feedback on COI Reports**

#### **Home Office response to IAS analysis**

**(APCI.6.7)**

3.1 The Chair said that the Immigration Advisory Service (IAS) had carried out a detailed analysis of the April 2004 Country Reports on China, Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), Turkey and Zimbabwe. This was a very thorough piece of work, which had been sent out to members in advance of the last meeting.

3.2 The Chair said that the Home Office had provided a response to the IAS analysis. It had responded to each individual comment on the COI reports by directly annotating the original IAS analysis; and also provided a brief paper responding in general terms. He invited Mr Attwood to speak about this.

3.3 Mr Attwood said that COI Service is very grateful for the painstaking work that IAS carries out. This had identified a number of typos and minor errors in the reports, which COI Service has since corrected. Professional proof-readers had been contracted for the October 2005 reports and an improvement in this area is expected. COI Service had accepted most of the comments in the IAS analysis and indicated in the annotated responses the reasons for not accepting those where there was a difference of opinion. There was little that he could add, apart from reiterating his thanks for the work IAS had carried out.

3.4 The Chair invited Dr Ensor to comment on behalf of IAS. Dr Ensor said that IAS welcomed COI Service's continuing openness to feedback and the productive relationship that was developing between the organisations. He also noted that the IAS paper commented on reports that had been produced under the 'old regime' of CIPU.

3.5 Dr Ensor said that he wanted to briefly respond to a point made in the Home Office paper, where it said:

At the 5<sup>th</sup> meeting of the Panel, the IAS representative, Amanda Shah, noted that the IAS's approach to examining Home Office COI material was very much a 'nose to ground' methodology, going back to the original source material and checking word by word whether it was adequately reflected in the COI Report. This approach is clearly very useful for identifying typos and errors such as where a source name has not been cited exactly. But we consider that the APCI researchers, who have expert knowledge of the countries concerned, are better placed to evaluate whether the COI Reports examined provide an accurate and balanced representation of the sources and country situation.

3.6 Dr Ensor said that this could be taken to suggest that IAS researchers are not qualified to comment on the reports. He therefore wished to stress that IAS considers itself to be a serious, research-led organisation and to explain the importance of the 'nose to ground' approach taken. The reports and source documents were examined line by line because this reflected the way that decision makers and appeals tribunals looked at the evidence.

Although the overall balance of the reports examined was fair, it is important to bear in mind that asylum judges are not inquisitors, so if a passage from a source document is omitted from a report, this can easily be overlooked.

3.7 Dr Ensor said he would not accuse the Home Office of bias, but at the same time it was important to be aware that the selection of material is not a neutral act. He also gave examples from the Democratic Republic of Congo report of slight changes of language which could alter the meaning of material. The report said that 'those perceived to be Tutsi faced possible persecution', whereas the sources noted in other non-quoted sections that persons who 'looked like a Tutsi', or who 'appeared Rwandan' were at risk. The report also said that 'a family of mixed ethnicity could be at risk' whereas the original source said that people of mixed ethnicity 'should be identified as a group at risk.'

3.8 Referring to Mr Attwood's intention to explore 'scientific' ways of evaluating source material, Dr Ensor felt that it is important that this does not lead to material being excluded: in general, as much information should be made available as possible. He also noted that whatever progress is made in the field of COI, this will not alter the fact that the applicant's evidence remains the primary source of information in determining an asylum application.

#### **UNHCR comments**

#### **(APCI.6.9)**

3.9 The Chair said that, as usual, UNHCR had helpfully provided comments on several COI reports. He invited Mr Andrysek to speak about them.

3.10 Mr Andrysek said that he had obtained comments from UNHCR local offices on eleven COI Reports. These were mostly suggestions for additional material which it may be useful to include in the reports. The Home Office usually accepted 95% of the suggestions and the UNHCR representatives were very pleased to see that their comments made a difference.

3.11 Mr Andrysek said that there has been a clear improvement in the Home Office's reports over the past couple of years, but that UNHCR has never thought there had been any bias in them. In general, it would always be possible to 'nitpick', but it seems that the time is approaching when they are running out of things to comment upon. He noted that UNHCR's comments on the Bangladesh report had been confined to a single sentence along the lines that the report was fine.

3.12 The Chair agreed that with the consistently good standard of COI Reports now being produced, the issue of 'diminishing returns' would need to be considered by the Panel and he would return to this at Item 6.

#### **Item 4 - Consideration of gender in COI Reports (APCI.6.8)**

4.1 The Chair said that at the last meeting, the Panel had discussed the way that issues relating to women are addressed in COI Reports. Ms Reisenberger had brought to the Panel's attention a Home Office instruction which advises caseworkers to consult COI Reports on a list of issues which may be relevant when assessing asylum applications from women. She had expressed concern that these issues are not being consistently addressed in all COI Reports.

4.2 The Home Office guidance, *Asylum Policy Instruction / March 2004: 'Gender Issues in the Asylum Claim*, had been circulated with the minutes of the last meeting. The Panel had asked the Home Office to consider the implications of the instruction for its COI material and whether the list of women's issues might form the basis for a checklist for matters to be included in the reports.

4.3 The Home Office had provided a compilation of the 'women's sections' from all the main COI reports so that members could get some idea of how the issues are covered, together with a brief paper. The Chair invited Mr Attwood to speak about this.

4.4 Mr Attwood said that the papers were self-explanatory. Having looked at the COI reports for the 'top 20' asylum countries, COI Service broadly accepted that the key 'women's issues' listed in the API should be reflected in COI Reports, where the information is available. After publication of the April 2006 reports, COI Service will be reviewing the structure of the reports and will consider adopting the headings in the API as a standard template for the section on women.

4.5 Mr Attwood mentioned that he had met with a delegation of Refugee Women Stakeholder organisations (Asylum Aid, Refugee Women's Association, Kurdistan Refugee Women's Organisation and Refugee Council) to discuss this issue. It had been a very useful discussion, much of it focussed on whether women's issues should be 'mainstreamed' in COI Reports or addressed in a separate section. COI Service had agreed to send the group a draft of the proposed new structure for reports when this is available.

4.6 Ms Reisenberger welcomed the Home Office's response on the gender issue and said that she had received positive feedback about the meeting with stakeholder organisations. The compilation of women's sections from the top 20 COI Reports was helpful and tended to support her view that there were some gaps on this issue in some reports. She said that using the list from the API as the basis for a checklist will help to bring consistency across the different reports. She thought that the matter of where material on women's issues should be located within the reports could be substantially addressed through greater use of cross references.

4.7 Ms Reisenberger said that in the case of victims of sexual abuse, the full implications and issues arising from this may not be disclosed by the applicant and there are dangers that these may not be addressed. Mr Attwood said that he saw this as an operational / policy matter. He said that the use of cross-references is encouraged wherever appropriate and that this message will be reinforced.

4.8 Ms Reisenberger said that if the information on gender issues is incorporated in the COI material as discussed, this would place the UK significantly ahead of Europe in this area. The EU is working towards common asylum procedures and there is an opportunity for the Home Office and the APCI to influence the development of common standards. It would be helpful if the gender issue could be highlighted in this context.

4.9 Ms Reisenberger suggested that the Panel should revisit the issue of gender in a year's time to monitor how it was being addressed. This was agreed.

#### **Item 5 - Stock take and way forward**

5.1 The Chair said that the way the Panel had worked so far has been very effective and has helped to produce significant improvements in the Home Office's country of origin information. The reports examined in the latest round of reviews were again found to be accurate and balanced representations of the available information on the countries concerned.

5.2 He said that the main outstanding issues concerned the way the material was presented rather than its content, in particular:

- the need for some commentary / analysis within the reports to give some context and shape to the information to make it more accessible; and
- some changes to the structure to make information easier to locate.

He noted that Mr Attwood had spoken about how the Home Office plans to address these issues in the coming months.

5.3 The Chair said that, in view of the good standard of the Home Office's reports and the fact that COI Service will be securing the direct input of academic country experts, the Panel's existing way of working is likely to bring diminishing returns. The Panel will therefore need to give careful thought to its future direction, one aspect of which was likely to be contributing to developments on the EU front.

5.4 He suggested that it would be premature to abandon the Panel's existing approach of focusing on several COI Reports, but said that it will be important to allow enough time at the next meeting for discussion of the Panel's future role and working methods. He therefore proposed that the next meeting should consider just four COI Reports to allow for proper consideration of strategic issues. This was agreed.

5.5 The Chair said that the Panel could commission follow-up reports on some of the countries reviewed last time (Democratic Republic of Congo, Iran and Pakistan), to monitor the extent to which its comments had been reflected in the April 2006 COI Reports. Also, the Home Office had asked if the Panel could look at Liberia because this may be considered for NSA status at some point in the future. As there were no other suggestions, it was agreed that the Panel should consider the COI Reports for Democratic Republic of Congo, Iran, Pakistan and Liberia at the next meeting.

5.6 The Chair said that in light of the Home Office's view that the process of having APCI researchers comment on COI Reports at draft stage was not feasible for top 20 reports, the reports would be reviewed after publication as previously.

## **6. Any other business**

6.1 There was no other business. The next meeting will be held on Wednesday 6<sup>th</sup> September at 2pm. The venue will again be Chatham House, subject to a room being available.