

**Immigration Advisory Service report 'Home Office Country Reports: An Analysis' September 2004: Home Office response**

**Introduction**

1. In September 2004, the Immigration Advisory Service (IAS) published an analysis of 23 of the Home Office Country Reports issued in April 2004. This paper responds to the IAS analysis and is in two parts. Part one responds to the general issues raised in the report; part two is a spreadsheet which lists every comment made on individual Country Reports, providing a response to each one and noting any action taken.<sup>1</sup> The paper confines its response to matters relating to the Country Reports and does not seek to address any comments on wider operational issues touched upon in the IAS analysis.

**Overview**

2. IAS has carried out a very thorough and detailed analysis of 23 Country Reports, which clearly entailed a considerable amount of work. As with the reports IAS published in 2003, this exercise has generated some very useful feedback. As before, we have considered this very carefully and made amendments to the Country Reports as appropriate.

3. The IAS report also makes some helpful suggestions regarding the way that the Reports are produced and presented, and these are being considered together with feedback from APCI and other commentators as we continue to refine our methodologies. Several of the measures introduced in the past year to improve our Country Reports flowed directly from suggestions in the previous IAS analyses. And one suggestion from the latest analysis - that there should be a clear cut off date for Country Reports, to make clear the dates of their currency - was implemented for the October 2004 Reports.

4. The IAS report takes the form of a series of evaluations of individual Country Reports, each by a different researcher, with a covering summary drawing out general themes and conclusions. In general, the evaluations of individual Country Reports appear to have been carried out in a fair-minded manner and contain a number of valid comments, which we have accepted. However, the overall conclusions of the researchers naturally reflect *all* their 'findings', many of which we would dispute. For this reason, we consider that the researchers' conclusions tend to overstate the negative aspects.

5. For example, several Country Reports are criticised for omitting

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<sup>1</sup> The spreadsheet covers those countries for which a Country Report was issued in October 2004 or will be issued in future. Where it is not planned to issue an updated version of a particular Country Report, the existing Country Report has been amended to address any errors identified by IAS, but no further action will be taken.

material that was not available until *after* 30 April 2004, when the Reports were published. These unfounded criticisms contributed to general conclusions that the Reports did not include all the available relevant material.

6. Perhaps understandably, the Summary of the IAS report also reaches conclusions based on the totality of the researchers' findings, including those which were incorrect. But in some cases, the Summary seems to paint a more negative picture of the Reports as a whole than can be justified by the sum of the findings of the individual researchers. This could give a misleading impression to readers, most of whom are likely to focus on the Summary rather than the original findings of the researchers. The press release for the Report is similarly misleading.

7. However, these concerns about presentation should not detract from the fact that the IAS analysis was, once again, a very valuable exercise. We are most grateful for the detailed feedback provided and the contribution that this will make to improving the quality of our Country Reports

### **Insertion of Home Office opinion**

8. The most serious criticism IAS makes of the Reports is *'the insertion of Home Office opinion'*. This is clearly a very serious issue, given the Home Office's statement that Country Reports do not contain Home Office opinion or policy. Although this is presented as the key finding of the analysis, close reading of the report shows that very little evidence of this problem was actually found.

9. The brief 'Findings' paragraph of the Executive Summary states *'... IAS still has major concerns over many of the Country Reports. In particular, IAS highlights evidence of the insertion of Home Office opinion...'*

10. Then, in the introductory paragraphs of the main summary, it says *'...a number of significant problems remain. The most significant of these is a lack of objectivity. At times this involves the direct insertion by the CIPU author of opinion into the text...'*

11. From the above passages, most readers would assume that this was a widespread problem. Only later, in the detailed section on Home Office Opinion does it become clear that 'direct insertion' of Home Office opinion only occurred in *'rare, but highly significant instances'* and that in most cases such opinion was 'inserted' indirectly via the selection of material. Further reading of the Summary and the individual evaluations reveals that 'direct insertion' of Home Office opinion only actually occurred in relation to a *single* Country Report – Nigeria. (The Eritrea example relates to the inclusion of arguably irrelevant material, not the direct insertion of Home Office opinion.)

12. We are grateful that this problem has been brought to our attention and the Nigeria Report has been amended accordingly. However, the Executive

Summary, the Summary and the press release for the report create a misleading impression of the scale of the problem.

### **Indirect insertion of opinion**

13. The IAS report indicates that Home Office opinion is sometimes inserted indirectly. The report indicates that this occurs '*...by way of an unbalanced representation of material from selected sources*'. This is an issue that has been referred to by other commentators as 'selective inclusion of material', a term perhaps less open to misinterpretation.

14. This issue arises from instances where IAS researchers noted that some information from particular source documents had not been included in the Country Report. In some cases, the suggested information had been overlooked and an appropriate amendment has now been made. But in other cases, the researcher was suggesting the inclusion of information from a source document that was considered irrelevant for the consideration of asylum applications or simply too detailed for the purposes of the Country Report.

15. The process of summarising source material for the Country Report clearly entails the exclusion of some information. Given the size of the Reports and the number of source documents being assimilated, it is probably inevitable that useful information will sometimes be omitted in error. In this context, the IAS report refers to comments made by Prof. Stephen Castles regarding the APCI evaluation of the October 2003 Country Report on Sri Lanka. Prof. Castles noted that '*...most of the errors found tended towards an 'overly optimistic picture about Sri Lanka' and that this suggested 'that the errors may not be completely random, and that some other factors may be at work*'.<sup>2</sup>

16. As we responded to Prof. Castles following that meeting, we do not accept that the fact that omitted material is 'negative' in character indicates an attempt to put a positive gloss the information. Given that most source documents essentially catalogue concerns about human rights issues it is virtually inevitable that any information excluded in the process of summarising will be 'negative' in character. Also, it is highly likely that in evaluating the Country Reports any researcher will be looking out for

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<sup>2</sup> The same APCI researchers' evaluation of the April 2004 Country Report noted considerable improvement: The commentary acknowledges that the Home Office '*...has gone to great lengths in responding to the criticisms expressed in the previous APCI report...*', noting that many of the concerns have been '*...tackled rather effectively by the authors*'. The commentary states that the measures introduced by the Home Office '*...have resulted in a much improved Country Report...*'; that '*...there has been a recognisable effort...to create a more balanced view of the human rights situation in Sri Lanka...*'; and that the Report '*...is now virtually free of technical errors.*'

examples where the balance of reporting appears too positive rather than too negative.<sup>3</sup>

17. IAS expresses the opinion that Country Reports have been a leading factor in the making of many wrong decisions, but do not provide any evidence to support this view. As with previous feedback from IAS and APCI, we do not accept that, in any of the examples mentioned in the current analysis, the omission of the information concerned would have affected decisions on individual asylum applications.

## **Objectivity**

18. Following the concerns raised about the selective inclusion of material, an interesting point is made in the first of the IAS report's Conclusions and Recommendations, where it states: *'It remains highly problematic that CIPU are part of the Home Office'*. This seems to suggest that CIPU's location within the Home Office is seen as the cause of any perceived lack of objectivity.

19. But the report goes on to say: *'The more detached and objective the Country Reports become, the more questions must be raised about Home Office policy.'* It then gives examples of how the country conditions described in the Country Reports for Sri Lanka and Somalia do not appear to support the policies in relation to these countries. While the policy issues are outside the scope of this paper, it would seem that IAS's point here actually seems to support the view that CIPU's material *is* objective, despite being part of the Home Office, rather than vice versa.

## **Structure**

20. In some cases where the researcher commented on the omission of information from the original source document, the suggested information was included in another, more specific section of the Report, which provided a detailed consideration of the particular issue. This point applied particularly to some of the Human Rights Overview sections and State Structures sections noted in IAS's list of sections deemed 'unreliable' because they only touched upon issues that were covered in greater detail in specific sections elsewhere within the Report.

21. In other cases, IAS note that the relevant information was included in the Report but suggest that it was not presented in an accessible manner. The conclusion / recommendation on 'structure' states: *'...structural failings...and the standard template lead CIPU to disperse the relevant*

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<sup>3</sup> Despite the likelihood that researchers will be looking for examples of over-positive reporting as this would be more likely to have an adverse effect upon the consideration of an asylum application, the APCI evaluation of the October 2004 Country Report for Nigeria identified more examples where the researcher considered the Report to have reflected an overly negative view.

*information throughout different sections and make the documents extremely difficult to use. We recommend that CIPU structures each Country Report to be of relevance to that particular country....At the very least the standard template should be re-examined.'*

22. The structure of Country Reports reflects the way that they are used by caseworkers, who have electronic access to them and use the contents page to identify the relevant section for the information required and then go directly to it. The standard template for all Country Reports was introduced in order to bring consistency. We aim to include cross references wherever appropriate and no problems have been reported by our internal users. However, similar comments on this issue have also been made by APCI and other commentators, suggesting that further thought may need to be given to the structure of Country Reports.

## **Analysis**

23. The IAS report repeats a suggestion repeatedly made by APCI and other commentators that Country Reports should contain some degree of 'analysis' to make the information collated from the various sources more easily intelligible. IAS express particular concern that *'...no attempt is made to point out discrepancies between sources – on several occasions CIPU give conflicting information from one paragraph to the next, without any indication that the conflict exists, let alone why preference should be given to one source over another.'*

24. As noted above, a basic principle of the Country Reports is that they should not contain any Home Office policy or opinion. In trying to ensure that the Reports remain scrupulously free of such comment, we have always avoided including any form of analysis in them. However, we accept that the inclusion of some brief explanatory contextual material may sometimes help to make the information clearer. The IAS report recommends that *'CIPU reports should include analysis and comment only to the extent that discrepancies between sources are pointed out to the reader'* and that *'Where sources conflict and it is possible to give precedence to one report over the other, CIPU should state this and give its reasons.'* This is a helpful recommendation, which usefully defines an appropriate degree of analysis to make the Reports clearer without affecting the essential content.

25. IAS also recommends that *'Rather than being a string of quotes starting with the positive and leading to the negative, often emphasising the former disproportionately, CIPU should begin each section with a brief introduction along the lines of "While the US Department of State reports that human rights were adhered to in general in Ruritania, Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch both give specific examples of torture in detention"'*. While we do not accept the inference that Country Reports usually begin with the positive and over-emphasize this aspect, the suggestion of a brief introductory overview at the beginning of each section is a helpful one, which we are considering.

## Editing

26. The IAS report suggests that the editing, quality assurance and checking of the Country Reports leave much to be desired. We accept that this aspect could still be improved in relation to several of the Reports and we will seek to ensure this for future editions. The IAS researchers listed all the typos they found, which has been very helpful to us in seeking to eradicate such errors. However, we do consider that the significance of such errors is rather overstated.

27. A fair number of typos and editing errors were found in the IAS report. It would be petty to list these, but the temptation to include the following quote from the Serbia and Montenegro evaluation, on this very subject, was too great to resist. *'This is show lack of proof reading and fragmentation of the report.'*(s6.45, p340). This demonstrates that such mistakes are not easy to eliminate, even in a piece much shorter than a Country Report. Also, as mentioned above, it is surprising that the references to 'omitted' material that was published after April 2004 were not edited from the chapters on the Afghanistan, Albania, Burundi, Iraq, Sri Lanka and Sudan Country Reports.

## Over reliance on a Single Source

28. The IAS report notes that all Country Reports *'rely extensively and uncritically on the US Department of State human rights reports'* and expresses concern about the reliability of this material. IAS observe that the quality of US Department of State (USSD) reports varies according to whether there is a US embassy in the country concerned and the US's political stance towards that country.

29. We accept that most Country Reports make extensive use of the USSD reports. It is one of the very few annual reports that cover almost all the same ground as the Country Reports, and in some cases it is the only one. Even for those Country Reports where the USSD is more heavily relied upon, it remains but one of many sources used and all material is attributed to it. The CIPU instructions require that all relevant material published by organisations such as Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, UNHCR and the others on the list of standard sources must always be used, where available. And whenever IAS, APCI or other commentators have suggested valid alternative sources, these have also been used.

30. We acknowledge the concerns about USSD reports mentioned by IAS. But, as noted above, the USSD is one of a range of sources used in each Country Report. Arguably, none of the source documents are absolutely objective, and many of the organisations that produce them have a particular perspective or focus. But, as with the other source documents used, we consider that USSD reports are generally sufficiently reliable to be worthy of inclusion. Having questioned the value of the USSD human rights reports, IAS suggest that given the reliance on these reports, it would be more cost effective and accurate to simply use them instead of producing Country

Reports. Presumably this is a tongue-in-cheek suggestion, but it does rather tend to devalue the contribution of the source documents produced by Amnesty International, HRW, UNHCR et al, all of which are included in Country Reports if available.

## **Sourcing**

31. The IAS report notes various concerns regarding the annotation and accuracy of references to sources and currency of sources used. Some of these reflect the fact that measures introduced to improve the citation of references were only partially implemented for the April 2004 Country Reports. Others show that in relation to some reports, further work is still required on quality checking and proof reading.

32. IAS suggest that citation of sources would be improved by the use of footnotes. This has not been done in the past because of the technical limitations of the IT network used by caseworkers. But we are hopeful that it should be possible to move to this approach in the near future.

33. IAS also suggest that where a source document is not available on the web, this should be made explicit and details given as to how to obtain the document from CIPU. While the absence of a weblink against a particular source indicates that it is not available on the web, we will consider whether there is a need for greater clarity on this issue. IAS also express concern that their requests to CIPU for source documents not readily available in the public domain were dealt with slowly or not responded to at all. As far as we are aware, the requests were dealt with promptly, but IAS are invited to contact CIPU's managers if this problem arises in future.

## **Conclusion**

34. In this paper we have attempted to respond to the main general concerns set out in the IAS analysis, with the detailed comments on individual Country Reports being addressed in the attached table. In several cases, IAS have made useful suggestions regarding issues such as structure, analysis and citation of sources and we have indicated that we will consider implementing measures along the suggested lines.

35. However, as noted in paper APCI.4.6, while the suggested changes may enhance the way that Country Reports are presented, we do not consider them to be crucial for the accuracy or integrity of the Reports and we do not propose to make any further significant changes to the basic format of Country Reports for the April 2005 edition.