

Advisory Panel on Country Information

**Minutes of 7th Meeting held on 31 October 2006 at
Arundel House, 13-15 Arundel Street, Temple Place, London WC2R 3DX**

Present

Dr Khalid Koser (Chair)	The Brookings Institution
Prof Gil Loescher	Centre for International Studies, University of Oxford
Dr Chris McDowell	Information Centre on Asylum and Refugees (ICAR), City University
Prof Roger Zetter	Refugee Studies Centre, University of Oxford
Dr Rosemary Hollis	Chatham House (The Royal Institute for International Affairs)
Mr Gottfried Zürcher	International Centre for Migration Policy Development
Mr Jerome Sabety	UN High Commissioner for Refugees, Protection Information Section, Geneva
Mr Jan de Wilde	International Organisation for Migration
Ms Nancy Kelley	The Refugee Council
Dr Alan Ingram	The Royal Geographical Society

Secretariat

Mr Nick Swift	COI Service, Home Office
Mr Adam Lavine	COI Service, Home Office

Observers

Mr Reinhold Jawhari	Austrian Centre for Country of Origin and Asylum Research and Documentation
Ms Beth Collier	Refugee Women's Resource Project, Asylum Aid
Mr Stuart Adam	Foreign and Commonwealth Office
Mr Neil Bradley	Foreign and Commonwealth Office
Dr Gary Raw	Research, Development and Statistics Directorate, Home Office
Mr Chris Attwood	COI Service, Home Office
Ms Elaine Dainty	COI Service, Home Office
Dr Jonathan Ensor	Immigration Advisory Service
Mr Mark Henderson	Immigration Law Practitioners Association

Researchers

Dr David Harris	School of Oriental and African Studies
Dr Gareth Price	The Royal Institute for International Affairs

Apologies

Ms Alia Al Khatar	UN High Commissioner for Refugees, London Office
Dr Laura Hammond	University of Reading
Mr Romit Jain	International Crisis Group
Ms Jan Shaw	Amnesty International
Ms Jane Shenton	Médecins sans Frontières
Mr Nick Oakeshott	Refugee Legal Centre

Item 1 - Introduction

1.1 The Chair welcomed those present. He said that a recruitment process for new members had taken place over the summer and this meeting had been postponed from early September to make it possible for the three new members to attend. He welcomed two new members, Prof. Roger Zetter and Dr Chris McDowell; the third, Dr Laura Hammond, was unfortunately unable to attend the meeting.

1.2 Dr Koser welcomed Nancy Kelley, who had replaced Anna Reisenberger as representative for the Refugee Council. He also welcomed some new observers: Beth Collier of Refugee Women's Resource Project at Asylum Aid; Reinhold Jawhari from Austrian Centre for Country of Origin and Asylum Research and Documentation (ACCORD); Neil Bradley and Stuart Adam of the Foreign & Commonwealth Office; and Elaine Dainty and Adam Lavine from the Home Office. He noted that the researchers who had reviewed COI Reports on Liberia and Pakistan, Dr David Harris of SOAS and Dr Gareth Price of Chatham House, would be joining the meeting later to present their findings.

1.3 The Chair thanked former members of the Panel for their valuable contributions: Mr Charles Radcliffe (International Crisis Group), Ms Anna Reisenberger (Refugee Council), Mr Oldrich Andrysek (UNHCR) and Professor Lord Bhikhu Parekh. He wished them all the very best for the future.

APCI's remit and the role of observers

1.4 For the benefit of those attending for the first time, Dr Koser briefly explained the function of the APCI and the role of the observers. He said the APCI's remit was very specific and quite narrow – to consider and provide advice on the Home Office's country of origin information (COI) material. Although COI played a crucial role in the asylum process, it was not part of the Panel's function to discuss wider asylum-related issues. Observers were welcome to participate in the discussions, but they did not take part in any decisions or recommendations made by the Panel. As yet, there were no rules of procedure on this, but the position would be kept under review.

Appointment of new members

1.5 Dr Koser outlined the rigorous process by which the three new members had been appointed. He said that the advertising, application forms, records of sifting, notes of interviews and recommendations to ministers had all been overseen by an independent assessor appointed by the Office of the Commissioner for Public Appointments (OCPA). Applications were first considered and sifted by a panel of three (the independent assessor, Mr Chris Attwood and Dr Koser), and then nine candidates were interviewed, of whom three were recommended to the Minister for appointment. The Minister had accepted the recommendations.

Application from UK Lesbian & Gay Immigration Group for observer status

1.6 The Chair said that an application had been received from the UK Lesbian & Gay Immigration Group (UKLGIG) to attend Panel meetings as an observer. UKLGIG is a voluntary organisation providing information and advice on immigration rights for same sex couples and asylum seekers. UKLGIG had already provided some useful feedback on COI products. Members unanimously approved UKLGIG's application to attend as an observer.

Visit to COI Service

1.7 The Chair said that he had visited COI Service in Croydon in May this year. He had sat with individual country officers to discuss their work and then had a meeting with the unit as a whole. COI Service country officers had expressed frank views on some of the feedback they had received from APCI appointed researchers, but generally felt that the APCI had played a very positive role. Dr Koser had found the visit very instructive and his overall impression was that those working in COI Service were very dedicated, hard working people.

Meeting with the Minister

1.8 Dr Koser informed members that he had met with Immigration Minister Liam Byrne the previous day (30 October). The Minister had thanked the Panel for making a "crucial contribution". Both parties had agreed that the Panel had been very effective and that the Home Office had been responsive to its recommendations.

1.9 Dr Koser had discussed with the Minister ILPA's letter of 21 April 2006 and the suggestion that the APCI should be able to review Operational Guidance Notes. This issue was a later agenda item.

1.10 They had also talked about the IND Review process. The Home Office was carrying out a review of IND. There were proposals for a new independent Inspectorate to consolidate the various bodies which advised upon and monitored IND functions. The Minister was not yet able to say exactly how the appointment of an independent Inspectorate would affect the APCI, because the review process was still at an early stage. APCI members would be invited to participate in a consultation process, which would likely begin in December 2006.

Matters Arising: APCI's Terms of Reference

1.11 Revised terms of reference had been circulated in April 2006 following the previous meeting. Agreement to these was confirmed.

Item 2 - COI Service - Update

2.1 The Chair noted that the Home Office had prepared a paper (APCI.7.1) with details of developments in the work of COI Service since it was established within Research, Development and Statistics (RDS-IND) in June 2005.

2.2 Mr Attwood introduced the paper. He recalled that the relocation of the country of origin information (COI) function within RDS was done to address two recommendations from the Panel: to ensure the structural separation of the COI from policy advice; and to bring greater research expertise to the production of the material. He then highlighted the key developments since COI transferred to RDS.

2.3 **COI Reports** (produced for the top 20 asylum intake countries) remained COI Service's most important products. When RDS took over COI, most of the APCI's concerns regarding the content of the Reports had already been addressed. However, there was scope for improving the way that reports were updated and some outstanding issues regarding the way material was presented. The following improvements were being introduced from the October 2006 editions of the reports:

- More frequent updates
COI Reports would be updated more frequently, as required, eliminating the need for bulletins to be issued if significant political or other changes took place in the country concerned.
- New report structure and reduction of overlap
A new standard structure for COI Reports had been developed. The new reports were divided into over 30 sections, compared with six previously, for easier reference and to facilitate updating. Overlap and repetition had been eliminated wherever possible.
[A mock-up of a COI Report, showing the new structure and contents, was tabled.]
- Introducing commentary to make reports more readable
To make the COI Reports more user-friendly, authors would be making greater use of commentary, including paraphrase and summary, as new material was added. Staff had received appropriate training to help ensure that the balance and accuracy of reports was not compromised.

2.4 Mr Attwood added that all COI Reports were professionally proofread and formatted by outside contractors.

2.5 All COI Service staff had attended a formal **training** course, delivered by the Austrian Centre for Country of Origin and Asylum Research and Documentation (ACCORD) in May 2006. The course had been developed with COI Service and specifically tailored to meet the needs of its researchers.

2.6 All COI Service country officers had been offered the opportunity to undertake a **familiarisation visit** to their principal country, in order to develop a 'feel' for its culture, to strengthen contacts with British embassies and develop networking arrangements with local human rights NGOs.

2.7 COI Service maintained **consultation arrangements** with the main users of its products. In particular, there were regular meetings of the COI Service **Users' Group**, a strategic group made up of senior representatives from users across IND; and the COI Service **Users' Panel**, comprising a sample of Caseworkers and Presenting Officers who actually used COI products on a daily basis.

2.8 In terms of external consultation, COI Service maintained regular contacts with UNHCR and various NGOs and interest groups. COI Service was also looking to establish close contacts with academic country experts for each top 20 country. The experts would provide feedback on the COI Report and be a ready source of ongoing advice for COI staff to call upon. COI Service had entered initial discussions with suitable organisations to explore options for setting this up.

2.9 The current range of COI Service products was set out in the annex to the paper and comprised: COI Reports for the top 20 asylum intake countries; COI Key Documents for the next 30 asylum applicant countries; and COI Requests to respond to specific questions raised by caseworkers.

2.10 Prof. Loescher praised the developments mentioned and said that country familiarisation visits and establishing contact with country experts in the UK were both excellent ideas. He asked whether thought had been given to interviewing returnees (failed asylum seekers) in countries of origin, and whether country officers would be going into prisons and detention centres during their visits. He also asked whether country officers received debriefings from officers of the major human rights NGOs (e.g. Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch) who had recently returned from fact-finding visits to countries of origin.

2.11 Mr Attwood said that it was outside of the remit of COI Service to interview returnees in their country of origin. He confirmed that country officers could visit prisons / detention centres during their familiarisation trips where this was possible. Country officers met human rights NGOs operating in their countries, but it would also be useful for country officers to meet with members of NGOs who had returned from missions: COI Service would welcome any opportunity to arrange this with organisations represented at the

APCI. Mr Attwood said he was aware that Jonathan Ensor had recently returned from Pakistan and it would be beneficial if he could meet with the relevant COIS country officer.

2.12 Prof. Zetter asked how updating COI Reports on a more frequent basis and direct contacts with academic experts might impact on the work of the Panel.

2.13 Mr Attwood said that more frequent updates of COI Reports should not affect the work of the Panel: it could continue to review a selection of the reports published each year. The contacts and feedback from academic country experts was intended to enhance country officers' understanding of the country and the range of sources available. This was different from (but complementary to) the work of the Panel which acted as an independent monitor and reviewed the final products.

2.14 The Chair asked whether there was a procedure in place for identifying suitable country experts. Mr Attwood said that there was no formal process for this but initial discussions were being held with Chatham House on a possible way forward, and other organisations may also be approached. Dr Koser said that it made sense for the Home Office to expand its contacts with academics and NGOs if this did not duplicate the work of APCI.

2.15 Mr Zürcher asked for clarification regarding the difference between familiarisation visits and fact-finding missions. Mr Attwood explained that unlike fact-finding missions, it was *not* the purpose of familiarisation visits to collect COI material and no COI reports would be written following them.

2.16 Mr Zürcher asked whether, with the continuous updating of COI Reports, there would be a parallel updating of Operational Guidance Notes (OGNs). Mr Attwood said that OGNs were outside of COI Service's area of responsibility and that he was not in a position to comment.

2.17 Mr Henderson raised the following points:

(a) As COI Reports were being continuously updated (which would be useful in principle) could stakeholders be alerted to the updates so that they did not have to keep checking the website?

(b) Referring to the inclusion of more commentary in reports, Mr Henderson asked how "commentary" might be defined.

(c) He also said he would like to see the material that was used by ACCORD for the training of COI Service staff.

(d) Mr Henderson asked how country officers decided which NGOs to establish contact with on familiarization visits. He suggested that the APCI might be given a list of countries to be visited so that members could suggest which NGOs to see.

(e) He also questioned whether impressions gained by country officers from prison visits, etc. during familiarisation trips might influence the selection of material to be included in COI Reports.

(f) He asked whether the minutes of Users' Group meetings could be made available to the Panel.

2.18 Taking these points in order, Mr Attwood responded as follows:

- (a) Stakeholders would be notified of COI Report updates;
- (b) 'commentary' was brief contextual material, as had been suggested by the Panel, to make the information in COI Reports more accessible – for example, to highlight cases where information from different sources conflicted;
- (c) the training material could be obtained from ACCORD, subject to their agreement;
- (d) a list of the countries to be visited would be provided to the Panel, so that members and observers could suggest organisations to contact;
- (e) given the requirement to include all standard sources, the influence of familiarisation visits on the selection of source material for reports was likely to be minimal - apart from highlighting any possible new sources of information;
- (f) minutes of Users' Group minutes could be made available to the Panel on request.

Item 3 - COI material for proposed NSA countries

3.1 The Chair outlined the role of the APCI in relation to the NSA process. The Government had given a commitment that the COI for any countries proposed for the NSA list should be reviewed by the Panel before any designation order was made. However, the Panel had no role in relation to the decision whether or not a country should be added to the NSA list. Its function was to examine and comment on the Home Office's COI. A note explaining the NSA process had been circulated following the previous meeting.

3.2 Dr Koser said that the Minister would be asking the Panel to review the COI material on a number of countries being considered for NSA designation. The Chair would be notified of the list of countries at the end of November. It was likely that most of these would be low asylum intake countries for which COI Reports were not produced: for these countries, the Panel would be asked to review 'COI Key Documents'.

3.3 The Chair explained that the 'COI Key Documents' was effectively an electronic bundle of source documents of the kind used to compile COI Reports, but without the summary that the COI Report provides. Thus, users had to go directly to the original source material for information required and an index was provided to facilitate this. With COI Reports, the Panel had looked at whether source material had been appropriately reflected in the report. As there was no report with Key Documents, the main role for the Panel would probably be in examining whether all relevant source documents had been included, whether the sources were accurate and up to date, and the way these were indexed. A copy of the Angola COI Key Documents, February 2006, was tabled as an example.

3.4 The Chair said that the Minister had asked that the Panel complete its review of the COI material as rapidly as possible, so that a new designation Order could be made early in 2007. Although the Panel did not yet know

which countries were to be considered, it would be helpful to give some thought to the likely process to be followed. In particular:

- Would it be necessary to commission individual experts for each country, or was there scope for commissioning an evaluation by a single organisation?
- If the Panel were asked to complete its review by the end of January, as seemed likely, would it be necessary to call an extraordinary meeting to consider the material, or could this be done by email?

3.5 After discussion, it was agreed that in order to ensure consistency with the Panel's work in evaluating COI Reports, the Key Documents for each country should be examined separately by individual country experts.

3.6 Dr Hollis asked what the implications would be in the event of the Panel "getting it wrong". Mr Attwood advised that the COI would be looked at by policy and legal advisors and they would then make a recommendation to ministers on whether a designation Order should be made. The Panel's role was solely to comment on the quality of the COI material; it was not the Panel's role to advise on whether or not a country should be designated.

3.7 Mr Henderson asked whether the overview section in the COI Key Documents was taken from specific sources. Ms Dainty said that the overview was not intended to be a summary but a brief introduction and was normally extracted from the most recent FCO country profile on the FCO website. Mr Henderson commented that there was not much the Panel could say about a Key Documents for any country if it was just a list of sources.

3.8 Dr Hollis commented that, with Key Documents, the caseworker was obliged to study the original source documents for the information they required. This would be more time consuming than looking at a COI Report. Mr Swift agreed, but said that resources were targeted where the need was greatest: COI Reports were produced on the top 20 asylum intake countries, as caseworkers spent the great majority of their time dealing with applications from these. Caseworkers rarely encountered applications from lower intake countries, but when they did so they would have to refer to the original source material which did take longer.

3.9 Ms Kelley said that in terms of targeting resources, she would have thought that NSA countries should have full COI Reports.

3.10 Mr Henderson suggested that the structure of Key Documents should be discussed against NSA needs. Dr Ensor agreed, saying that COI could only be assessed in the context of its application. The Chair said that these matters would be discussed by the Panel when it considered the researchers' findings.

3.11 Dr Koser said that the next issue to be decided was whether it would be necessary for the Panel to physically meet in January, or if its

consideration could be achieved 'virtually' by email? After brief discussion, it was agreed that a meeting would be required. An extraordinary meeting of the APCI would therefore be held in January 2007 to discuss the evaluations of the COI for proposed NSA countries.

3.12 Dr Koser said that the next issue to be considered was that of confidentiality. In the past, at the request of the Home Office, the Panel had always maintained confidentiality about the countries being considered for possible NSA designation until the minutes were published. At the previous meeting it had been agreed that the researchers reviewing the COI material should be made aware that they were looking at COI for a country being considered for NSA designation. The Chair asked whether members and observers would agree to keep confidential the names of the countries under consideration for NSA designation.

3.13 Mr Swift explained that the reason the Home Office was asking for confidentiality to be maintained was that if the countries were known in advance of designation, this could trigger an increase in asylum applications from people seeking to avoid being subject to the NSA process.

3.14 Dr McDowell said it would be difficult to guarantee confidentiality over the period of the evaluation exercise. He also thought that confidentiality was at odds with the general principle of transparency in the way the Panel operated. Ms Kelley supported this.

3.15 Mr Henderson asked for clarification on what was meant by confidentiality for an organisation such as ILPA. Who within the organisation could be told? Dr Raw said that he thought this a matter of discretion – that there would be some individuals who might need to know for the purposes of considering COI and many others who clearly would not.

3.16 Mr Swift advised that, in the past, members had been asked to give an undertaking of confidentiality in dealing with possible NSA countries, but observers had not. Observers had therefore not been informed of the names of countries being considered until the papers were issued for the meeting. The disadvantage of this approach was that observers had little time to consider the material for the countries concerned. The Chair said he would prefer to keep members and observers together in this project if possible.

3.17 After further discussion, agreement was reached and the Chair summed up the position. On this occasion, members and observers were willing to respect confidentiality regarding the list of countries under consideration for NSA designation, but with the following three reservations:

- (a) the Panel questioned the reasons for confidentiality being requested;
- (b) the Panel reserved the right to revisit the issue of confidentiality in future;
- (c) one of the great strengths of the APCI was transparency, and confidentiality was contrary to that principle.

3.18 Dr Koser briefly recapped on the process to be followed. Timing was very tight: by the beginning of December, the Chair would receive a list of countries and would have to commission researchers to review the COI on each one; there would then be an extraordinary meeting in mid-January; and the Panel would need to publish its minutes shortly thereafter.

Item 4 - Operational Guidance Notes (OGNs): Letter from ILPA

4.1 The Chair said that he had received a letter from ILPA, arguing strongly that the APCI should review OGNs. The letter had been circulated. Dr Koser had responded to the letter saying that he would raise the issue with the Minister, and he had done so during their meeting the previous day.

4.2 Dr Koser recalled that his predecessor, Prof. Castles had discussed this issue with Des Browne when he was Immigration Minister and they had both agreed that, as OGNs were policy documents, they fell outside the remit of the Panel. However, Dr Koser said that he was persuaded by the arguments in the ILPA letter that OGNs contained elements of COI and that the Panel should be able to review these.

4.3 Dr Koser had put this point to the Minister and suggested that it may be possible for the Panel to review the COI element of OGNs without commenting on policy issues if the COI could be extracted for this purpose. The Minister had undertaken to consider this and to write to the Chair with a response.

4.4 Before inviting discussion, the Chair asked Mr Swift to briefly explain the purpose of OGNs. Mr Swift said that OGNs were concise documents which provided policy guidance to caseworkers on the main types of claims from a particular country. They contained policy advice, caselaw and selected COI material. They were intended to be used in conjunction with COI Reports and other COI Service material.

4.5 The Chair reiterated that the Panel could not consider the policy element in OGNs, but said there seemed to be a case for looking at the COI in these documents. Dr Koser said he thought it might be feasible to examine extracted COI material from an OGN to see if this was balanced and sound.

4.6 Ms Kelley said she was opposed to the idea of extracting the COI material from OGNs for consideration by the Panel. She considered that it would be necessary to evaluate the COI element within the context of the policy guidance. Ms Kelley said that Panel members could readily distinguish evidence from policy in an OGN. But it was necessary to see the context in which the COI evidence appeared.

4.7 Mr Zürcher said that one needed to look at the use, or function, of the information to decide whether or not it was 'impartial'. A summary of COI in

an OGN might lead readers to believe that a particular issue was simple and clear-cut, whereas in reality it might be more complex.

4.8 Dr Ensor said that one of the reasons that the Panel should have oversight of OGNs was that they sometimes contained the only Home Office COI available on a particular country. This had been the case with the OGN for Libya.

4.9 Mr Henderson said that the function of the APCI was to make recommendations to the Secretary of State on the Home Office's COI material. This was determined by primary legislation and it was therefore not for the Minister to decide whether or not the Panel should be evaluating the COI content in OGNs.

4.10 He said that it was important that the APCI looked at OGNs for two main reasons: caseworkers often looked only at the OGNs and did not consult COI Reports; and presenting Officers often handed OGNs to immigration judges for consideration rather than COI Reports. In his view, the APCI was presently looking at only parts of the COI produced by the Home Office.

4.11 Mr Henderson reiterated his concerns about COI Key Documents being used as a basis for NSA consideration and suggested that OGNs should be made available for all NSA countries. The Chair said the Panel might find that Key Documents did not convey sufficient information, but that was a matter to be discussed at the next meeting.

4.12 Mr Sabety noted that there was a formal channel for UNHCR to comment on OGNs, though only the OGN for the DRC had been dealt with so far. Mr Attwood referred to the UNHCR Quality Initiative which sampled decisions made by caseworkers and looked at the materials available to them.

4.13 Following further discussion, there was general consensus that the APCI should be able to review the COI material in OGNs and that the Minister should be made aware of this. The Chair said that, subject to what Liam Byrne said in his letter, he would write to the Minister expressing the Panel's view.

In view of the time and the fact that researchers Dr Harris and Dr Price were waiting to introduce their papers, the Chair directed that the reviews of COI Reports should be moved up the agenda and dealt with next.

Item 5 - APCI reviews of COI Reports

5.1 For the benefit of those new to Panel meetings, the Chair briefly explained the process by which individual COI Reports were examined by the Panel. As members of the Panel did not have the resources or country expertise to consider the material in detail themselves, researchers were commissioned to review each COI Report looked at by the Panel and produce an evaluation paper, bringing out the main findings. As usual, the Home Office had annotated responses to the researchers' individual comments

directly onto the researchers' papers and would also have the opportunity to respond after the papers had been presented.

Pakistan (APCI.7.6)

5.2 The April 2006 COI Report for Pakistan was reviewed for the Panel by Dr Gareth Price of Chatham House. This was a follow up evaluation to the one undertaken on the April 2005 Pakistan report by the same researcher.

5.3 Dr Price said he had found that the overall quality of the Pakistan report had much improved since April 2005. The report gave a balanced overview and there had been no selective editing. Although there were still a few anomalies, such as unnecessary repetition, it was, overall, an accurate and balanced report. He said that the new structure for reports was a significant improvement and would help to make the reports more focussed.

5.4 Dr Price felt there was a strong case for there to be separate sections in the Pakistan report for the province of Baluchistan and the region of Waziristan, rather than incorporating information on these throughout various other sections. Dr Price's paper listed a number of additional sources for future reference.

5.5 Mr Sabety reported that four different UNHCR Protection Officers in Pakistan had reviewed the COI Report of April 2006; none of them had found significant problems.

Liberia (APCI.7.5)

5.6 Dr David Harris of the School of Oriental and African Studies had reviewed the April 2006 Liberia COI Report.

5.7 Dr Harris said that Liberia was a war-torn country in which the political and human rights environment was changing rapidly. A continuously updated COI Report as described by Mr Attwood would be very useful for Liberia.

5.8 Dr Harris noted that the COI Report for Liberia covered a broad range of issues in detail and no pattern of misrepresentation or omission was found. However, there were areas of the report that should be further developed. These included the collapsed justice system; the rise of vigilantism in the country; and ethnic and property-related tensions. Dr Harris had also suggested certain additional sources.

5.9 Dr Harris said that it would be helpful if more commentary could be provided in COI Reports to make them more readable. He suggested that the task of introducing a greater degree of paraphrase and summary in COI Reports while ensuring that balance and accuracy were maintained, could perhaps be carried out by external reviewers.

5.10 Mr Sabety said that UNHCR had published a position paper on Liberia in August 2005, and that a 2006 update was now available. He said that there were some discrepancies with statistics in the COI Report.

5.11 Dr Koser noted that Liberia was currently out of the top 20 asylum countries of origin and therefore would not be updated in October 2006. Ms Dainty noted that if Liberia re-entered the top 20, a COI Report would again be produced on the country.

Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) (APCI.7.3)

5.12 The DRC COI Report for April 2006 had been reviewed by Albert Kraler of ICMPD. This was a follow up evaluation to one undertaken on the April 2005 report by the same researcher. The paper was introduced by Gottfried Zürcher, Director General of ICMPD.

5.13 Mr Zürcher suggested that, if possible, it may be a good idea to obtain more in-depth information on conditions in certain areas of the country – particularly those areas from which asylum applicants to the UK were coming. He also noted that there were some valuable sources of information on the DRC in French, and asked if these could be translated.

5.14 Mr Zürcher said that the COI Report was otherwise excellent and much improved on the April 2005 version.

5.15 Ms Dainty said that COI Service did arrange for some source material to be translated but noted that ensuring accuracy of translations and cost were significant issues. Mr Zürcher offered the assistance of ICMPD researchers in identifying sources in other languages.

5.16 Mr Sabety said that the currency of some content in the DRC report could be improved upon because of the date of publication; in this respect, the new process of continuous updating would help. UNHCR considered that there should, in future, be more emphasis on journalists and attacks on the media, as well as on minors – particularly with respect to internal travel.

Iran (APCI.7.4)

5.17 The April 2006 Iran COI Report had been reviewed for the Panel by Haleh Chahrokh of ICMPD. This was a follow up evaluation to the one undertaken on the April 2005 report by the same researcher. Again, Mr Zürcher introduced the paper.

5.18 Mr Zürcher said that it would have been useful to have more current information on the treatment of homosexuals in Iran. Apart from that, ICMPD's assessment of the report was very positive – a 'clean bill of health'.

Home Office response (APCI.7.7)

5.19 Mr Attwood said that the Home Office paper was self-explanatory so he would be brief. He noted that the feedback from APCI researchers had been generally positive and no major problems had been found. He said that he was pleased with the quality of the reports but there would always be room for improvement.

5.20 Mr Attwood said that one area which would benefit from further input from the APCI was the identification and possible translation of reports published in languages other than English. He thought this would be addressed as COI Service developed relationships with external academic country experts.

5.21 He said that COI Service had begun to forge links with particular interest groups such as the women's refugee organisations and the UK Lesbian & Gay Immigration Group; and he felt that the Panel would benefit from their input as observers.

5.22 Mr Attwood said that the APCI had helped the Home Office to achieve considerable progress with the quality of its COI but that this needed to be sustained. In general, he saw the APCI's ongoing feedback as an important tool in helping COI Service to build and maintain a culture of continuous improvement.

5.23 The Chair agreed on the need to guard against complacency.

Item 6 - European perspective on COI

6.1 The Chair said that the Home Office had offered to provide an overview of COI activity in the European context and invited Elaine Dainty to speak on this subject. Ms Dainty gave a brief outline of COI Service's involvement in the European arena.

6.2 Following proposals by the Council of the European Union that there should be a greater degree of practical co-operation between EU Member States, one of the key aims of the European Commission was to achieve the joint compilation, assessment and application of information on countries of origin. The Commission had therefore proposed that there should be one single common database, populated and maintained by, and accessible to all Member States.

6.3 Member States had discussed the proposal at meetings of Eurasil (the EU network for asylum practitioners) and agreed that common guidelines should be developed; that a solution would need to be found to translation needs; and that a common portal should be established so that Member States could access each other's databases.

6.4 Ms Dainty explained that, whilst the UK was content for other EU Member States to continue to have access to our existing COI as part of the Common Portal, there would be less benefit to the UK in obtaining access to other Member States' databases, as the majority of material held was restricted, and therefore could not be used in the UK asylum decision making process.

6.5 Ms Dainty said that, as the Panel was aware, the UK did not maintain a database of COI material, but instead produced COI Reports and Key Documents compiled wholly from material produced by a wide range of recognised external information sources. This approach facilitated transparency and acted as an "intelligent filter" system, directing decision makers to the most relevant and informative COI available. These products were very highly regarded as effective decision making tools by all other asylum receiving countries.

6.6 Ms Dainty said that the UK was currently a member of a small project team, comprising representatives from several EU Member States, which had been set up to develop EU guidelines for the use and validation of factual COI. The methodology applied had included the development of a questionnaire to identify current practices across the Members States. Subsequent analysis of the responses, together with conducting in depth meetings with key COI producing countries, resulted in a number of conclusions and the identification of best practices. These would underpin the development of draft guidelines, which would be tested by a reference group before being discussed by all Member States at a Eurasil meeting in 2007.

6.7 Ms Dainty said that the Eurasil network arranged workshops on countries and topics of particular interest to Member States, for the purpose of exchanging information and experience. She noted that the UK had chaired a recent workshop on Eritrea, which had received very positive feedback from both the Commission and individual participants.

6.8 Ms Dainty informed the Panel that COI Service had recently participated in a workshop at the General Directors of Immigration Services on Asylum, which explored the possibility of Member States each "sponsoring" certain countries with regard to the provision of COI, which would reduce the need for all Member States to research all asylum generating countries. The UK had expressed its interest in principle.

6.9 Mr Zürcher commented that the UK was the only country which could not make use of confidential information in reports.

6.10 Mr Henderson asked whether the draft European Guidelines would be disclosable. Ms Dainty advised that they were not disclosable, but that they were in any event at a very basic level..

Item 7 - Future directions for APCI (APCI.7.2)

7.1 Dr Koser's paper had been circulated prior to the meeting. However, due to time constraints, its presentation was held over until the next APCI meeting.

Item 8 – Any other business

8.1 The Chair said that the Panel would decide at its January 2007 meeting which COI Reports would be evaluated next. China and Iran were provisionally listed. Mr Henderson requested that the Sri Lanka report also be included.

8.2 The Chair set the following dates provisionally:

9 January 2007 (2pm): Extraordinary meeting to discuss COI material
for countries being considered for NSA.

6 March 2007 (2pm): 8th APCI Meeting