

# Lesson Plan Overview

<b>Course</b>	Asylum Officer Basic Training
<b>Lesson</b>	<b><i>Country Conditions Research and the Country of Origin Information Research Section (COIRS)</i></b>
<b>Lesson Description</b>	This lesson explains how country conditions information obtained from outside sources is to be considered in the adjudication of a request for asylum. Through demonstrations and practical exercises in a student computer lab, trainees gain experience in conducting country conditions research on the Intranet and Internet for use in an asylum program adjudication.
<b>Field Performance Objective</b>	Given a request for asylum (including Credible Fear and Reasonable Fear requests) to adjudicate, the asylum officer will research country conditions information and correctly use this information to determine eligibility for the relief sought.
<b>Interim (Training) Performance Objectives</b>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Identify the role of country conditions information in adjudicating requests for asylum and other related forms of relief.</li> <li>2. Explain when research into country conditions is necessary.</li> <li>3. Conduct a search on country conditions information.</li> <li>4. Explain when to cite country conditions information when writing a decision.</li> <li>5. Identify when country conditions information is material to asylum eligibility.</li> <li>6. Use country conditions information in a decision.</li> </ol>
<b>Instructional Methods</b>	Lecture, computer lab practical exercises, visual aids
<b>Student Materials/References</b>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Participant Workbook</li> <li>2. Immigration and Naturalization Service, Resource Information Center. <a href="#"><i>INS Resource Information Center, Bibliographic Citing Standards and Practices</i></a> (Washington, DC: February 2001), 11 p. (attached)</li> <li>3. Electronic resources reference materials (distributed in class)</li> </ol>
<b>Method of Evaluation</b>	Practical exercise exam, written test

## CRITICAL TASKS

**SOURCE: Asylum Officer Validation of Basic Training Final Report (Phase One), Oct. 2001**

Task/ Skill #	Task Description
001	Read and apply all relevant laws, regulations, procedures, and policy guidance.
010	Conduct country conditions research.
011	Conduct legal research.
026	Write decisions using established format.
036	Review all evidence and determine materiality to claim.
SS 3	Ability to work independently and effectively.
SS 9	Ability to analyze and apply country conditions information.
SS 14	Ability to work effectively with computers.
SS 18	Ability to use relevant Service database systems.
E 1	Relevant reference materials and databases.
E 2	Internet and Intranet.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

<b>I. INTRODUCTION</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>II. IMPORTANCE OF COUNTRY CONDITIONS INFORMATION</b>	<b>4</b>
A. Enables Officers to Elicit Relevant Information and Form Reasoned Decisions	4
B. Provides Objectivity and Fairness	5
C. Promotes Consistency	5
<b>III. ROLE OF COUNTRY CONDITIONS INFORMATION IN THE ADJUDICATION PROCESS</b>	<b>5</b>
A. Pre-Interview Preparation	6
B. Eliciting Testimony at the Interview	7
C. Adjudicating the Request	9
<b>IV. SOURCES OF INFORMATION</b>	<b>10</b>
A. Country of Origin Information Research Section (COIRS)	10
B. Public Sources	10
C. Multiple Sources	11
D. Chronologically Relevant Sources	11
E. Reliability of Sources	11
<b>V. RESEARCH TIPS</b>	<b>14</b>
A. Become Familiar with Types of Information Available	14
B. Focus the Research	16
C. Know When to Stop	16
D. Save and Reuse your Previous Research Efforts	16
E. Circuit Rides and Other Off-Site Interviews	17
<b>VI. USE OF COUNTRY CONDITIONS INFORMATION IN DECISION MAKING</b>	<b>17</b>
A. Country Reports <u>Match</u> a Claim in Detail	17
B. Country Reports Corroborate the Broad Outlines of the Claim, but <u>Not Specific Details</u>	18
C. Country Reports <u>Directly Contradict</u> or <u>Refute</u> the Claim	19
D. Country Reports <u>Neither Corroborate Nor Refute</u> the Claim	20
E. Applicant Presents Unfamiliar Country Information	20
F. Citations	22
<b>VII. SUMMARY</b>	<b>23</b>
A. Importance of Country Conditions Information	23
B. Role Of Country Conditions Information In The Adjudication Process	23
C. Sources of Information	24
D. Research Tips	24
E. Use of Country Conditions Information in Decision Making	25

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## Presentation

## References

### I. INTRODUCTION

Country conditions information plays a fundamental role in adjudications of the asylum program in that it enables officers to use objective criteria to identify whether an individual is eligible for the relief sought. The importance of country conditions information is emphasized in the regulations under *Training of asylum officers*:

The Director of International Affairs shall also, in cooperation with the Department of State and other appropriate sources, compile and disseminate to asylum officers information concerning the persecution of persons in other countries on account of race, religion, nationality, membership in a particular social group, or political opinion, torture of persons in other countries, and other information relevant to asylum determinations, and shall maintain a documentation center with information on human rights conditions.

[8 C.F.R. §208.1\(b\)](#)  
(1 Jan 2004)

The purpose of this lesson plan is to provide guidance on the role of country conditions in asylum program adjudications; namely, on how to access and use country conditions information to prepare for and conduct an interview and determine eligibility.

### II. IMPORTANCE OF COUNTRY CONDITIONS INFORMATION

The legal standard for “refugee”; set forth in treaty, statute, and regulations, and developed by case law; provides a foundation for objective asylum adjudication. This foundation, however, cannot stand alone and must be complemented by a thorough understanding of country conditions. Knowledge of both the law and country conditions is imperative to forming objective, reasoned, and consistent determinations.

#### A. Enables Officers to Elicit Relevant Information and Form Reasoned Decisions

In almost all cases, country conditions information is essential to properly:

1. Ask questions that fully develop the applicant's claim.

An adjudicator equipped with an understanding of country

conditions can better identify the most relevant parts of an applicant's story, and can ask specific questions to develop the appropriate parts of the applicant's testimony. This is especially true when a confused or inarticulate applicant needs assistance in describing a claim.

2. Evaluate the objective or factual basis of the claim and eligibility.

Proper use of country conditions information provides the officer context to evaluate claims of past persecution, and enables the officer to better assess the risk of harm to the applicant if returned. Additionally, it helps the asylum officer identify applicants who may be barred as terrorists or persecutors and determine whether an exception to the one-year filing deadline may exist.

3. Assess credibility.

Knowledge of country conditions helps the officer to ask appropriately probing questions to evaluate credibility. It can help an asylum officer to uncover fraudulent claims more effectively and fairly. Such knowledge can also prevent an asylum officer from erroneously finding an applicant not credible because the applicant's experiences are foreign to the asylum officer's own experience of how people and governments behave.

#### **B. Provides Objectivity and Fairness**

Proper use of country conditions information to reach a decision helps prevent arbitrary decision-making and allows the asylum officer to explain and defend the decision if challenged, e.g., by their Supervisory Asylum Officer (SAO); Asylum headquarters's Training, Research And Quality (TRAQ) division, or the applicant. Basing decisions on sources of information available to all promotes accountability and fairness, and allows the decision to withstand public scrutiny.

#### **C. Promotes Consistency**

The use of reliable country conditions information also promotes consistency in decision-making, not only for each officer, but also among asylum officers and across the Service.

### **III. ROLE OF COUNTRY CONDITIONS INFORMATION IN THE**

## ADJUDICATION PROCESS

It is imperative that an asylum officer routinely consults country conditions information, even when the officer believes he or she is familiar with the current situation in a country. Conditions in refugee-producing countries often are volatile and subject to frequent change.

### A. Pre-Interview Preparation

To ask informed questions during the interview, the asylum officer needs to be familiar with conditions in the applicant's country.

Prior to the asylum interview, the asylum officer must review the file to determine the basis of the claim. If the asylum officer is unfamiliar with conditions in the country from which the applicant fled, he or she should quickly review the general government structure, basic political situation, and human rights conditions in that country. This can be done in a reasonable amount of time by referring to resources available on the desktop computer through the Intranet and the Internet, as well as in the asylum office's library. Materials gathered and prepared by the COIRS, available through the Intranet and in each office's library, can assist in providing the necessary background information. Officers should maintain an in-depth familiarity with the wide variety of sources so that they can consult the most relevant source in the short time available for pre-interview research.

Officers should keep in mind that there are some useful sources that can only be found in the local office library. Maintaining a familiarity with the contents of the local office library and not relying exclusively on electronic resources provides for a greater range of useful sources.

There are many excellent sources of country conditions readily available to asylum officers, from Intranet sources such as COIRS products (papers, query responses, News Summaries, COIRS Databases, Country Conditions on the Asylum Virtual Library and others) to material available on the Internet.

If the asylum officer is unfamiliar with a group to which the applicant belongs, a quick word search on the Internet using a reliable search engine, such as Google; or a quick word search of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugee's RefWorld; or of Intranet sources, [such as the Asylum Virtual Library (AVL), may provide basic information that will enable the asylum officer to ask informed questions at the interview. Bear in mind, however, that information found on the Internet should be carefully evaluated for reliability. Information found on the Internet or on other electronic sources, such as the Intranet or databases, may also be dated. In addition, the Internet and other electronic resources cannot contain information about every group in the world. The fact that a group is not found in the sources consulted does not mean that the group does not exist.

## **B. Eliciting Testimony at the Interview**

1. Use knowledge of country conditions to elicit information that could establish the applicant's status as a refugee.

Knowledge of country conditions helps identify groups at risk.

**Example:** The father of an applicant from country-X "disappeared." Soon after, the applicant's family began receiving anonymous threats and fled. When the officer questions the applicant as to whether his father belonged to any groups or organizations, the officer learns that the father was an active member of a union. Although the applicant does not fully understand why his father's union membership is relevant to his claim, the asylum officer's knowledge of "groups at risk" in the applicant's country leads the asylum officer to properly elicit details from the applicant about his father's union membership.

2. Use knowledge of country conditions to elicit information to evaluate credibility.

Often an applicant has no documentation or witnesses to support a claim. Country conditions information provides a context for asking relevant questions and evaluating the applicant's credibility. The more knowledgeable an asylum officer is about the applicant's country and any group to which the applicant claims to belong, the better the asylum officer will be able to formulate questions to probe the applicant's credibility, where appropriate.

Informed questioning may expose inconsistencies and falsehoods in the applicant's claim. Informed questioning may also help re-establish credibility when something at first impression appears inconsistent or implausible.

**Example:** An applicant claims to have suffered persecution because of his active participation in a political party in 1989. Because the asylum officer knows that national elections were held in the applicant's country in 1989, the asylum officer knows to elicit information about the applicant's participation in the elections (e.g., whom he supported, whom he opposed, the names of opposition parties, etc.). The asylum officer can then check this information for consistency with country reports regarding the election.

The asylum officer must use caution, however, in evaluating an applicant's lack of knowledge regarding events or organizations in the applicant's country. There are varying degrees of membership in parties or organizations, as well as varying levels of communication within organizations. For example, an applicant may be unaware of the clandestine activities of part of his organization due to a high level of secrecy within the organization itself.

3. When appropriate, ask the applicant about country conditions in his or her country.

If appropriate, the asylum officer should allow the applicant to "educate" him or her on conditions, events, groups, or other information pertinent to the asylum request. Officers should remain open to the possibility that the applicant is providing information not available elsewhere.



This should not be a substitute, however, for country conditions research done by the asylum officer prior to/after the interview, but rather the officer should use the information provided by the applicant in his or her research.

In conducting research based on the information provided by the applicant, the officer may discover that the information available generally corroborates the information given by the applicant, or, in some instances, may directly contradict the information given by the applicant. This can be used in the credibility evaluation.

4. Use knowledge of country conditions to elicit information to determine whether any mandatory bars apply.

Knowledge of country conditions is critical in eliciting testimony about potential bars to asylum, such as engaging in terrorism or persecution of others.

**Example:** An asylum officer knows that many students at applicant's former university were informants who caused other students to be arrested and tortured. The officer should elicit information to determine whether the applicant participated in or assisted in the persecution of others.

**Example:** If an asylum officer knows that the military unit to which the applicant belonged engaged in persecution of others, or that the opposition group to which the applicant belonged sometimes engaged in terrorist activities, the asylum officer will better elicit the information necessary to determine whether a mandatory bar applies.

### C. Adjudicating the Request

Except for cases where there is a serious lack of intrinsic credibility, country conditions information normally weighs significantly in evaluating asylum eligibility. Country conditions information may play a critical role in evaluating:

- Credibility
- Objective basis for fear (e.g., reasonable possibility)
- Nexus to a protected ground

- Availability of internal relocation
- Application of mandatory bars

#### IV. SOURCES OF INFORMATION

##### A. Country of Origin Information Research Section (COIRS)

###### 1. Background.

To address criticism and concerns that asylum adjudicators relied on their own subjective concepts of country conditions in refugee-producing countries, or relied exclusively on reports motivated by foreign policy considerations, regulations were implemented in 1990 to require the Director of International to maintain a human rights documentation center.

[8 C.F.R. §208.1\(c\)](#)  
(1992)

Pursuant to the 1990 regulations, the Resource Information Center (RIC), now referred to as the Country of Origin Information Research Section (COIRS), was founded. COIRS gathers and makes available country conditions information from a wide variety of sources such as governmental and non-governmental sources, media, academic journals, human rights monitoring agencies, and refugee advocacy groups. The COIRS provides information independent from other government agencies to ensure that foreign policy or other improper considerations do not play a role in the adjudication of asylum requests.

###### 2. Services.

The COIRS's workload is divided into geographic regions.

Currently, there are four geographic regions, with a regional coordinator assigned to each. A regional coordinator is responsible for:

- a. collecting information about their region from a wide variety of sources,
- b. disseminating information to the field through papers, query responses and other sources, and
- c. helping to coordinate field trainings in country conditions and research techniques.

**B. Public Sources**

Generally, asylum officers should use publicly available sources. Mistakes and biases in such sources can be challenged and corrected.

**C. Multiple Sources**

Generally, asylum officers should use multiple sources. Errors are most likely to occur when asylum officers (even those who have studied or lived in a country) rely solely on their own understanding of country conditions. Asylum Officers must be aware of what the preponderance of the reporting says about a certain area before drawing conclusions about conditions in that area from a single source.

**D. Chronologically Relevant Sources**

Asylum officers normally must conduct research using the most current information available, especially when a situation is deteriorating in a country. Country conditions rarely improve markedly overnight, but they can deteriorate rapidly. However, situations may arise in which the asylum officer needs information regarding historical events in order to evaluate a claim properly. The applicant may present evidence of past events that should be examined in light of chronologically relevant sources.

**E. Reliability of Sources**

Any source of information is only as useful as it is reliable. A source of information that routinely distorts the facts to promote an agenda, or routinely makes factual errors, should not be relied upon. If a source generally bases its reporting on the facts as agreed upon by the majority of observers, it gains credibility.

Materials supplied by the COIRS may be presumed to be reliable. Sources encountered outside of COIRS purview should be evaluated carefully.

The information below can assist the asylum officer in evaluating the reliability of unfamiliar sources.

1. Agendas.

The fact that a source may have a perspective or bias does not mean that it should be assumed to be factually wrong.

**Example:** The New York based Committee to Protect Journalists has an agenda to protect journalists, but it is this agenda that motivates the organization to compile a detailed list of journalists who have been attacked and imprisoned.

Asylum officers should look behind the rhetoric and political objectives that influence an organization's efforts, in order to distinguish between the organization's agenda and the facts presented. Asylum officers should consider whether the organization makes a good faith effort to present facts in a credible manner.

2. The Media.

Country conditions information from the media should be reviewed with caution, and the asylum officer should be aware of the potential for distortion of truth by the media due to censorship, manipulation, and lack of expertise.

a. Censorship and manipulation

The media in refugee-producing countries and some countries of first asylum, which may be experiencing domestic problems, may be inhibited and cautious due to local censorship and the practice of the local media to follow government wishes.

The squelching of local media coverage of human rights abuses is common in countries where such issues abound. Similarly, manipulation of the media to further political agendas is common in many refugee-producing countries.

b. Lack of expertise

It may be difficult to determine if the underlying facts of a story are accurate because journalists are often unversed in local law, human rights laws, and the history or political details of certain conflict. Journalists may fail to look beyond what was presented to them and often do not have the time or

resources to verify all the information they receive. Therefore, they may misrepresent an issue out of ignorance.

3. General Considerations for Unfamiliar Sources.
  - a. Does the source have a reputation for accurate and balanced reporting?
  - b. Is the information generally consistent with other reporting?
  - c. Does the author employ a research methodology that can be judged? How are quotes handled? How close was the author in time and place to the events described?
  - d. Is the tone of the report balanced or does it sound angry or vindictive? While it is important to consider the tone of the report, remember also to look past the rhetoric and try to determine what the facts are.
  - e. Is there any information available about the group that prepared the report and does it indicate any bias on the part of the group?
    - (i) If the source is a non-governmental organization (NGO), what is its philosophy? How reliable has its information been in the past?
    - (ii) If the source is an intergovernmental organization, what is its mandate?
    - (iii) If a United Nations rapporteur, what were the restrictions placed on his or her sources and who were the sources?
    - (iv) If a newspaper or magazine, what is its political bent?
    - (v) If the source is the government, what is its record in the area of human and civil rights? Can its information or official "propaganda" be corroborated?
    - (vi) If the source is a government opposition group,

can the information be verified? Has it been factually accurate in the past? Is it consistent with other independent sources?

## V. RESEARCH TIPS

### A. Become Familiar with Types of Information Available

Due to time constraints, it is imperative that the asylum officer becomes familiar with the wide array of sources that are available and how these sources can be most efficiently used. It is also important that they know which sources to consult in different situations. An asylum officer should know when it is best to consult the Internet, the Intranet, their office library, or the COIRS.

1. Use electronic resources to the greatest extent possible because key terms can be searched easily.
  - a. Use search engines to locate information on the Internet.
  - b. Use the COIRS Internet Guide on the AVL to determine which Internet sites are the most relevant to the type of research you are doing.
  - c. Check the Country of Origin (COI) section of the Asylum Virtual Library (AVL) for relevant postings on the country and topic being researched.
  - d. Consult specialized databases available on the Internet. Information on these databases will not show up on the results from normal search engines.

For example, Westlaw is a specialized database that can be searched for news and journal articles that often cannot be easily found on the Internet. There are other specialized databases that asylum officers have access to that may be useful, such as Open Source Center (OSC) and Jane's Intelligence Report.

- e. Other specialized databases are maintained by the COIRS. These are available through the Country of Origin (COI) section of the Asylum Virtual Library (AVL) on the Intranet. These databases include the El Rescate Database covering El Salvador, the Guatemalan Military Database, and the COIRS News Summaries for Asylum Adjudicators, and other

country specific databases.

- f. The country conditions section of the Asylum Virtual Library contains many articles and reports that are archived from the Internet and pertain specifically to country conditions that may impact on asylum determinations.
2. Consult your office's library for hard copy reports when information is needed to verify events that occurred prior to the mid 1990s, as these reports are often not archived on the Internet.
3. Consult the COIRS when you are unable to find information on the Internet or in your local library and the information is necessary to arrive at a decision on a case. It may also be appropriate to consult the COIRS when you have encountered too much information and cannot synthesize it for your particular needs. The COIRS can provide assistance in analyzing and clarifying the information gathered.

**B. Focus the Research**

In researching country conditions, the asylum officer should keep in mind what specific country conditions information is needed to enable the officer to make a decision on the case. The asylum officer should not waste time reading information that is unrelated to the applicant's claim. This may best be accomplished by first consulting the Internet or other electronic sources of country conditions information in which key terms can be easily searched for. Whenever looking for something in an electronic document, be sure to make use of the "find" tool to move directly to the relevant text of the document.

**C. Know When to Stop**

The asylum officer must have a general understanding of current conditions in the applicant's country to make a reasoned decision. However, often country conditions information will not be the only basis for the decision. When a decision is not based primarily or solely on country conditions, the asylum officer need only do sufficient research to establish the general context of the applicant's claim and to ensure that the asylum officer's knowledge of conditions in the country is up-to-date.

When accessing country conditions in electronic form it is useful to try searches in 2 or 3 search engines, and to review the top 10-15 hits, but time spent with additional search engines and looking beyond the top hits provided by a search engine is wasted time.

**D. Save and Reuse your Previous Research Efforts**

Once the asylum officer has conducted useful research, the officer should take the couple of minutes required to store and organize the research so that it can be reused should future need arise. This can be done by bookmarking websites, and creating country folders to store research; however, in relying on archived country conditions, it is necessary for an asylum officer to update this resource periodically.



## E. Circuit Rides and Other Off-Site Interviews

Prior to any circuit ride, the asylum officer should review files or anticipated claims, when possible, to determine if they contain claims involving a country or group with which the asylum officer is unfamiliar. Because many off-site interview locations (such as detention facilities) will not be conducive to conducting country conditions research, the officer should prepare for these interviews while still in the asylum office where information is accessible. It may be useful to conduct a search of electronic sources for events or groups relating to the claims, print the pertinent pages, and bring them along for the off-site interview. Copies of the annual reports on specific countries done by various human rights and governmental organizations can be accessed electronically and printed out to take to an off-site interview.

## VI. USE OF COUNTRY CONDITIONS INFORMATION IN DECISION MAKING

Below are some general guidelines on how country conditions can be used in evaluating various claims:

### A. Country Reports Match a Claim in Detail

It is unusual for country conditions to specifically corroborate *all the details* of a claim, even valid claims. Still, this does happen occasionally in both valid and fraudulent claims.

**Example:** Applicant claimed he was founder and editor of an independent daily newspaper in his country. His application included claims that his paper was the most influential publication in his country, but its critical reporting landed him and his staff in trouble with the government on numerous occasions. The testimony detailed several arrests of the applicant, his wife, and other staff members as well as numerous closures of the paper by the government. Applicant testified that the paper was eventually burned to the ground and he and his wife were exiled to another country, where they founded another national daily paper. After a military coup in the third country he and his wife were deported because of their paper's reporting on the military junta that took power.

In the example given above country conditions reports corroborated the specific detail of the applicant's claim, including the applicant's name, the name of the newspaper that the applicant founded, and also the events detailed by the applicant; therefore, in this instance, the country reports matched

the applicant's claim in detail.

The claim may be a very carefully prepared story, or it may be genuine. The officer still must test credibility and establish the applicant's identity. This claim would initially appear valid; now the asylum officer must complete the analysis in light of the applicant's testimony. For example, did the applicant adequately relate other information that was material to the claim? Was he consistently detailed about his role as editor and publisher of a daily paper, his experiences in exile, and his own arrest? In addition, because of the prominence of such a figure it is logical to expect to find some information about him on an Internet search also. Does that information corroborate his story?

**B. Country Reports Corroborate the Broad Outlines of the Claim, but Not Specific Details**

In most cases, available country conditions will *generally* corroborate an applicant's claim, but information on the *details* of the applicant's claim will not be readily available. Country conditions reports that generally corroborate an applicant's claim lend credence to the applicant's story. If the applicant's own testimony is plausible, detailed, internally consistent, and corroborated in its broad outlines by country conditions information, further corroboration of specific details is not necessary.

**Example:** A Guatemalan applicant describes how his remote village is the target of an attack by a local Civil Patrol chief. Because the United Nations monitoring mission has never visited the area, there are no reports of trouble in the region, however country reports generally indicate that members of the Civil Patrol have carried out human rights abuses against political opponents and others. Additional questioning allows the applicant to describe a credible account of a situation in a region previously unmentioned in human rights or news reports which conform to a pattern of abuses reported in other areas.

**Example:** Country conditions information indicates that female genital mutilation (FGM)/female genital cutting (FGC) is widespread in a particular country, but more prevalent in the north. An applicant claims that FGM/FGC is practiced by her ethnic group, from the south. Unless, after further research, the asylum officer uncovers specific reports indicating that the applicant's southern ethnic group does not practice FGM/FGC the asylum officer should accept that country conditions corroborate the applicant's claim.

If there are any other problems with applicant's testimony, this type of situation is a good example of the type of situation where the COIRS should be consulted.

## C. County Reports Directly Contradict or Refute the Claim

When an asylum officer relies upon country conditions to directly refute an applicant's claim, the asylum officer should check at least two reliable sources.

### 1. Credibility.

If country conditions information directly contradicts or refutes the applicant's claim, the claim may not be credible.

**Example:** The applicant claimed to have been an active member of a political party since 1981. Country reports establish that the political party was not formed until 1985. Because country reports directly contradict the applicant's claim, the applicant's claim that she was an active member of that party is not credible.

**Caveat:** The applicant should always be given the opportunity to rebut this type of discrepancy since there may be a good explanation for the contradiction: applicant may have belonged to a pre-existing party, which merged with several other pre-existing parties in 1985.

*See, Lesson, [Credibility](#), Section IV (B). Providing the Applicant an Opportunity to Explain Perceived Inconsistencies and Discrepancies*

### 2. Objective fear.

If country reports specifically refute the applicant's claim that he or she is at reasonable risk of persecution, then the fear most likely is not reasonable, even if the facts the applicant related are credible. In such cases, the asylum officer should cite one or more reliable country conditions reports to explain the conclusion that the applicant failed to establish a well-founded fear.

**Example:** Applicant fears that, as a member of an opposition party, she is at risk of persecution. However, reliable country conditions reports indicate that opposition party members freely express their opinions, are a strong force in the government, and there have been no reports of threats, arrests or harassment of opposition leaders for many years.

**Asylum officers must be careful to distinguish between country reports that generally fail to support a claim and country reports that specifically refute a claim.**

County conditions materials do **NOT** refute a claim when

- None of the sources address the applicant's situation
- The sources mention some groups at risk (not including the applicant's) but do not specifically state that only those groups are at risk
- The sources are not relevant to the applicant's situation in the time frame it was experienced.

#### **D. Country Reports Neither Corroborate Nor Refute the Claim**

The fact that country reports mention **some** events or human rights abuses directed against **some** groups, but do not mention **particular** events or human rights abuses directed against a **particular** group does not mean that the events or abuses did not occur. Sometimes country conditions reports focus on major problems or particular groups in a country, to the exclusion of others. For example, a report may lump together several small minorities by making statements such as “other minorities also experience difficulties.” In such cases, it is difficult to determine which minorities are having difficulties.

The weight to be accorded a lack of corroboration in country conditions reports depends on the particular case. In some cases, the lack of corroboration may not be given much weight, because the claim is very case-specific and the applicant comes from a country in which it is difficult for human rights monitors to access information.

The lack of corroboration may be given greater weight if the applicant fears persecution in a country in which reliable human rights information is easily accessed and the applicant's claim is based on facts that one would reasonably expect to be reported.

There may arise a case in which the applicant alleges the occurrence of events that the asylum officer reasonably would expect to be able to find reports on. In such cases, the lack of corroborating reports may cast doubt on the credibility of the claim. However, a lack of corroboration should almost never form the sole basis for a negative credibility determination.

#### **E. Applicant Presents Unfamiliar Country Information**

The asylum officer may be the first to hear about human rights abuses or other developments in a country. In many countries, reporters and human rights monitors may be impeded from gathering up-to-date information or practice self-censorship. Human rights monitors, if there are any, may be paying attention to areas where violations are more widespread.

**Example:** In 1976, shortly after the Indonesian invasion of East Timor, six Australian journalists disappeared. Between 1976 and 1991 there was virtually no on-the-ground reporting of the human rights situation in East Timor because it was deemed too dangerous for reporters or human rights monitors. What information that was available came exclusively from refugees fleeing the country.

**Example:** In Myanmar (Burma) there are many parts of the country where outsiders (journalists and human rights monitors) are not allowed.

When an applicant presents information that is unfamiliar to the officer, the officer should elicit as much detail as possible about the circumstances surrounding the described events and evaluate this for consistency with whatever general information is available about the applicant's country.

Asylum officers should not find consistent and detailed testimony not credible, solely because the country conditions described are unfamiliar. When an officer has serious doubts about credibility based on lack of country conditions information, the officer should contact the COIRS.

## F. Citations

### 1. When to Cite

See lesson, Decision [Writing Part II, Legal Analysis](#).

**Country conditions information must be cited in the written decision if it is relied upon in making the decision.**

### 2. How to Cite

#### a. Summarize.

It is not necessary to quote extensively from country conditions reports. A summary of the relevant information relied upon will suffice.

When using sources in electronic form, where cutting and pasting is available it may be quicker to pick an appropriate selection and quote it directly.

#### Examples:

Country conditions have not significantly changed since the time Applicant, a government employee with the Transitional Federal Government, was persecuted in 2006. See: Human Rights Watch (HRW). Aug 2007. “Shell-Shocked: Civilians Under Siege in Mogadishu,” Volume 19, No. 12(A); [http://hrw.org/reports/2007/somalia0807/6.htm#\\_Toc174082633](http://hrw.org/reports/2007/somalia0807/6.htm#_Toc174082633), (Accessed 14 Mar 2008).

For proper citation format, refer to [INS Resource Information Center, Bibliographic Citing Standards and Practices](#) located at the end of this lesson.

Reliable reports indicate that the Egyptian government “detained and abused Internet bloggers.” See: United States Department of State (U.S. DOS). 11 Mar 2008. “Egypt: Country Reports on Human Rights Practices – 2007,” Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor; <http://www.state.gov/g/drl/rls/hrrpt/2007/100594.htm>, (Accessed 14 Mar 2008).

#### b. Be accurate and complete.

The summary must accurately reflect the source quoted. Never use material selectively, take material out of context, distort the overall message of the source, or claim that the source says something that it does not say.

#### Example:

A State Department report states that religious

freedom is guaranteed by the constitution of country X. The report further states that in practice, violence against Jehovah's Witnesses is common and that the government does not punish perpetrators of such violence. It would be incorrect to make the following statements:

"According to the State Department, religious freedom is guaranteed under the laws of X. [cite]; therefore, it is not reasonable for the applicant to fear she will be persecuted because she is a Jehovah's Witness."

- c. Ensure that information is current or chronologically relevant.

Information relied upon should be current or chronologically relevant to the events relayed by the applicant. When citing to an annual human rights report, refer to the latest available edition, unless an earlier version is needed to corroborate a specific historical incident.

## **VII. SUMMARY**

### **A. Importance of Country Conditions Information**

1. Enables officers to elicit relevant information and form reasoned decisions.
2. Provides objectivity and fairness.
3. Promotes consistency.

### **B. Role Of Country Conditions Information In The Adjudication Process**

1. Pre-interview Preparation.

Prior to interview, asylum officer must become familiar with general conditions in applicant's country and basic facts about any group to which applicant claims to belong.

2. Eliciting testimony at interview.
3. Use country conditions information to elicit information about applicant's status as a refugee and any mandatory bars that might apply, and to elicit information to evaluate credibility.
4. Adjudicating the request.
5. Country conditions may help in evaluating; credibility, the objective basis for the claim, nexus, internal relocation, and application of mandatory bars.

**C. Sources of Information**

1. Consult with the COIRS and its resources.
2. Use public sources. [Note: While one has to log into a paid subscription service, such as Political Handbook of the World, <http://library.cqpress.com/phw/>, these are still considered "public" sources.]
3. Use multiple sources.
4. Use chronologically relevant sources.
5. Consider reliability of sources.

**D. Research Tips**

1. Become familiar with types of information available.
2. Focus the research.
3. Know when to stop.
4. Save and reuse your previous research efforts.
5. Prepare for off-site interviews.



## E. Use of Country Conditions Information in Decision Making

1. It is rare for country conditions to corroborate all the details of a claim. When country conditions corroborate the broad outlines of the claim and the applicant's testimony is generally credible, no further corroboration of specific details is necessary.

If country reports **directly contradict** or **refute** a claim, then the applicant's credibility is called into question, as may be the objectivity of the applicant's fear of harm.

The fact that country conditions reports **neither corroborate nor refute** the claim does not mean that the events or abuses did not occur. The weight to be accorded a lack of corroboration depends on the particular case and country.

Country conditions information does **not** refute a claim when none of the sources address the applicant's situation; the sources mention some groups at risk but do not specifically state that only those groups are at risk; the sources are not current.

2. Country conditions reports should be cited in the assessment and NOID when they are relied upon in reaching a determination on the request.
3. It is not necessary to quote extensively from country conditions reports; a summary will suffice.
4. Be accurate and complete. Never use material selectively or take material out of context.
5. Ensure that the information is current and/or chronologically relevant.