

PRESS RELEASE
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Success for Tony Lola!

Three weeks after Didsbury school children delivered a 2,100 strong petition to the Home Office, news has come through that their schoolmate Tony Lola (9) and his mother Mireille, can stay.

News came through on Monday morning from Lucy Powell, the prospective Parliamentary candidate (Lab), who received a phone call from Immigration Minister Phil Woolas.

Mandy Pierlejewski, one of the teachers at Tony's school said "after working so hard to support Tony in his campaign, we are all over the moon with the result. After hearing the news, Tony's class mates let out a great cheer. Tony put his head in his hands, overwhelmed by the enormity it.

The children will never forget these events. They know that politics is for everyone and really CAN make a difference."

Tony's plight has become very real to his classmates and they have been central in voicing concerns, both locally and nationally.

Tony Lola (9) has attended Didsbury C of E Primary School since he arrived in the UK from the DR Congo in 2005. Prior to being brought to the UK, he had been arrested (aged 6) in order to 'flush out' his politically active father. On arrival, he joined his mum, Mireille, who had fled the DRC in 2002 after being arrested and persecuted for her political beliefs.

Tony has amazed everyone with the progress he has made since he joined the school and has changed from a traumatised and frightened little boy to a happy, confident, polite and caring member of the community. He and his Mum attend Emmanuel Church, Didsbury and Mireille sings in the Church Gospel choir. People across the community, of all ages and backgrounds, including local schools, businesses and churches, have wholeheartedly supported the campaign. The petition took the campaign to a global level, with some signatories from as far flung as New Zealand and Hong Kong.

Ruth Wilson, who helped coordinate the campaign and is a parent of another Year 5 pupil at Didsbury Church of England Primary School, said "We're absolutely delighted that the Home Office have seen this individual case on its merits"

She added "We are lucky enough to be able to put our faith in democracy in this country. This campaign has enabled our children to have a voice and as future voters, to see how democracy works".

Revd Dr Nick Bundock Team Vicar at Tony's church in Didsbury said, "I'm thrilled to bits, this is the best news we could have ever dared to hope for. Our thoughts and prayers are now with the countless others in fear of forced

removal and who fear for their lives, who don't have such a committed group supporting their just cause."

Lucy Powell, prospective Labour candidate said, "Thanks to the efforts of everyone in school and Tony and Mireille's community, we have this great news. The well mobilized campaign has raised the profile of the broader issue that there are many more children like Tony who are slipping through the net, being sent home and living in danger. The point of asylum is to provide a refuge for those being persecuted."

Tony and Mireille's local MP, John Leech added, "This is great news. I was delighted to show Tony, his Mum and their friends around Parliament and then to hand in the petition to the House of Commons. I am glad that the Government has taken notice of the petition, and has reversed their decision. I'm really pleased for Tony and Mireille and I would like to pay tribute to all the hard work from everybody involved in the campaign to allow them to stay."

Ruth Wilson said, "We're really grateful for all the local support from the school, community, media, local churches and the cross-party support from politicians. This has demonstrated that Mireille and Tony are valued and welcomed."

Mireille said, "Thank you for all you have done for us"

Notes to the Editor

1. Tony Lola and his mother Mireille were asylum seekers from DR Congo. Their first claims failed due to a lack of evidence. In February, Tony and Mireille had to go for an interview with Home Office officials. This was in order to prepare travel documents for their removal back to the DRC.
2. Tony's school and Church community immediately began a campaign to 'SAVE OUR LOLAS!'
3. The petition (<http://www.gopetition.co.uk/online/25165.html>) had 1,735 electronic signatures and an additional 300 signatures on a paper version when it was delivered to the Home Office Monday 30 March. Many signatories are from the local community.
4. The group that delivered the petition included Tony & Mireille; Matt Whitehead (Tony's head teacher); Rev. Nick Bundock (St James and Emmanuel); nine other primary school children and their parents.

5. The National Curriculum requires children in Year 5 learn to write in a persuasive style. The school decided that asking each one to write to Ed Balls could be part of their home work. The group that travelled to London also delivered letters from all Year 5 pupils to the Department for Children Schools and Families (DCSF), where they were the children met the Under Secretary of State, Baroness Dyleth Morgan.
6. The campaign website is <http://www.stjamesandemmanuel.org/> which includes the 'Tony Lola' campaign song, updates on this campaign, and links to what the press have written
7. Signatories include local religious leaders; many of Tony's school friends; Tony's Head teacher (Matt Whitehead); and cross-party support, including local (Lib Dem) councillors; John Leech MP (Lib Dem Withington); Sir Richard Leese, Chair Manchester City Council (Lab); Baroness Joyce Gould of Potternewton (Lab; Deputy Speaker HoL); Lord Keith Bradley (Lab, former Home Office Minister and the previous MP for Withington). The online version is searchable by name.
8. Some further recent background information on the political situation in DR Congo that relates specifically to the political risks include
 - a. UNHCR: <http://www.unhcr.org/refworld/country,,FREEHOU,,COD,456d621e2,487ca2008,0.html>
 - b. Human Rights Watch: <http://www.hrw.org/en/news/2008/11/25/dr-congo-president-brutally-represses-opposition>
 - c. ICRC <http://www.icrc.org/Web/Eng/siteeng0.nsf/html/congo-kinshasa-interview-191207>
9. The sudden rise in removals to DR Congo is summarised in the Independent article 5 December 2008 <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/home-news/uk-expels-5000-congo-refugees-1055695.html>
10. Further information is available from Mandy Pierlejewski at Didsbury CofE Primary School (0161 445 7144, 07932342029) or the "Let Tony and his mum stay!" campaign organisers Ruth Wilson (07748164297) or Ruth Penfold (0794 102 7494)