

UK drops DNA tests for refugees and asylum seekers

June 17 2011, By MARIA CHENG , Associated Press

(AP) -- Britain has dropped a controversial policy of using DNA tests to identify the nationality of African refugees and asylum seekers after criticism that there is no scientific merit to the practice.

According to a statement issued Friday by the U.K. Border Agency, the government "does not plan to take forward DNA or isotope testing for country of origin identification purposes" and has also suspended an internal review of the program. It did not explain why it was not continuing the program.

The [pilot project](#) first began in 2009 and was heavily slammed by experts, who said it was not possible to pinpoint a person's nationality based on their genes. Authorities in Britain described the testing as voluntary, and some applicants were asked to provide a mouth swab or hair or nail sample in cases where there were questions about their nationality.

The government said such tests provided valuable evidence in assessing whether asylum seekers are telling the truth about their country of origin. The tests were used only on people who claimed to be from Somalia, Ethiopia, Eritrea, Kenya, Uganda and Sudan.

Refugees may be eligible for asylum in Britain if they can prove they face persecution at home because of their race, religion, [political views](#), [sexual orientation](#), or other factors. People from more repressive or chaotic countries, like Sudan or Somalia, often have a better chance of

gaining asylum than those from more stable countries like Kenya.

Experts at the U.K. Border Agency were hoping to match [DNA samples](#) to [genetic lineages](#) in certain countries, which might suggest where a person was from. But, scientists maintained the tests offered very little solid proof.

"Science is an uncertain business," said John Harris, a professor of [bioethics](#) at Manchester University and a member of the Human Genetics Commission, a government advisory panel. "This was probably a mistake from the start because it was unlikely to be reliable."

The project was completed last March, with an evaluation scheduled to be published later - but those plans have also now been shelved.

Besides genetic tests, British officials also used isotope analysis of asylum seekers' hair and nail samples. Scientists can look at the composition of certain elements like oxygen or strontium to see where a person has been.

But these isotopes are present only so long as the hair and nails have recently been growing, meaning such tests will only give clues into an applicants recent whereabouts.

Britain has been a lightning rod of controversy in the debate over security versus civil liberties. It has one of the largest DNA databases in the world, with more than 5 million samples collected by authorities to help fight terrorism and crime.

Harris said that even if the genetic tests were not overly intrusive, the perception of authorities taking DNA from [asylum seekers](#) is disturbing.

"Scientific tests are often wrongly regarded by all parties as infallible

and it becomes very difficult to challenge them," he said. "It then becomes very difficult to have a level playing field."

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