Telling our Stories, Finding our Roots, Exeter's Multi-Coloured History Interview Transcript

Interviewee: Dr Hashim RASHID

Interviewers: Nazima Khan and Richard Bradbury

Date: 5th February 2013

Venue: New Horizons Café, Exeter

Transcriber: Miranda Harvey

Q. Today is the 5th February 2013; it's Nazima interviewing brother Rashid at New Horizon Cafe, so we'll start with Salam Alaikum. So brother, tell us about your cafe, what inspired you, your story really, about Exeter, how you came here, when you came here, that would be nice if you know.

I came in 1982 to study. My name Hashim Rashid first of all, Dr Rashid, and I came here to study Masters in 1982 at the University of Exeter, a two years course by examination, and then when I finished I applied for a PhD in International Relations and graduated in 1990 from University of Exeter. For the MA I graduated in 1984. Then I worked in London for about 6/7 years and then came back to Exeter, a research department I used to work in London, sorry [hesitates] then I left it I come to Exeter because my family was here, my children and my wife. Then in 2001 I thought of creating a business with some friends and it was indication of a consultancy which was editing and helping students mainly in their theses and research and teaching and this kind of things, bringing students from the Middle East to study English language and the university helped them with that. We did some contract with the university, with the language schools around and started picking up from there.

Q. Oh sorry, did you tell us where you came from?

No; I came originally from Palestine, Jerusalem, Jordan. At the time because a lot of students were coming here to study in England and especially Exeter because of the atmosphere for the students, quiet, calm, nice...we thought to create something special for them, because of course any student comes especially the young one, they feel homesick, so we tried to create an atmosphere of home. So we thought of creating this business called the New Horizon in Arabic *Al Ofaqa Al Jedid*, that means when the sun is rising early in the morning in Arabic, translated as 'New Horizon', because the idea is new and everything is new around it and the British don't know much about it. And we have we tried to make it fresh, to make it good like home so we don't mix our food with the British food for example or other food from other countries we make it purely Arabic, based on halal food and all the notion of this. To our surprise the British like it very much and we have since then a successful cafe in Exeter.

Q. Was it easy to get the food, like halal food?

Yes, it was easy because there are around 40 men in Cornwall they are doing the meat in the Islamic way, halal, so we used to buy it from there –

Q. Is that far?

Not far from here, about 40 miles. And you can find it also in the Cash & Carry, halal food yeah, like Macro and the others, Bookers. There are special companies also around

Britain selling it, in England. So it was not difficult to get your hand on it, so it's nothing new that. And yeah, I mean since then everything was ok, not bad.

Q. What year roughly did you open the cafe?

We opened in April 2001.

Q. And who were your customers - Middle East students?

No, I think we succeeded to be an international cafe or multinational cafe where you have Muslims from all countries: Malaysia, Pakistan, India and the Middle East. British Muslims, English Muslims and we have Italian, we have France, we have from Spain, students who come from Belarus from Russia. Yeah we have very good customers from Serbia, from Croatia, all these guys who love the kind of food we are doing, they are coming after all these 10 years we have a lot of them coming around and mixing. And of course the main source of income is from the English. We started slowly with them but when they start knowing the kind of food, the freshness of the food and the taste of the food - we have some English customers for about 10 years now, they come every week. And we have some of them from around Exeter, like Tiverton, Crediton, Taunton, Torquay, Totnes, Bampton, and Bude. I mean different town...when they come to Exeter for shopping, for visiting friends or something, they always come here - so I can say it is a mixture in the feeling of the...you can find any one, you can find any language, but mainly the core of the business is British English.

Q. The locals?

Yes, and around it.

Q. Did you have any difficulties when you opened?

No, as with any new business, first of all to find the place, it was difficult to find a place and where you want a place, and how expensive the place or not, it depends. So we found this place here and we worked hard about 2-3 months to prepare it because it used to be a charity shop, for old books, these things and then we turn it into a cafe. Difficulties - what kind of menu, how we can organise the menu, how expensive or not expensive, suit people, not suit people, that kind of structuring.

[Richard Bradbury Technician enters the interview; Dr Rashid and Nazima welcome and greet him]

Q. No problem, we were just asking what the difficulties were

Yes that's the main difficult thing which of course any project you always you have to study around and see the cost benefit of it. So you have to make sure you are just not taking a risk, not calculated risk especially when opening something new. It's not tried but in this city never tried to present Arabic food, kind of Arabic food, Middle Eastern food, Mediterranean food in the way we represented and not like big chains or something, and we succeeded with that I think.

Q. You mentioned you didn't have problems with ingredients, was it easy to get Mediterranean/Arabic vegetables, like aubergine, was it easy to get...?

Yes, I mean...all the markets here, the local farmers they can find it, they can bring it and we buy it because we small business anyway so we buy locally and there is small businesses also selling the vegetable and these things, we buy it from them, its a mutual thing that they give us discount and we take it from them instead of going to supermarket chains and these things. That's our vegetable, you can find everything seasonal one, you can find them in these providers and small businesses they can bring everything. Yeh, yeh we have no difficulties, we don't see any difficulties sometimes the prices of course [laughs]. And it depends, how up and down, it depends on the season, you see. You mentioned aubergines - these days over 4-5 kilos are £15 or something and normal prices are £6-7 for 5 kilos, now its more, the same with iceberg, the same with cucumbers and these things, anyway in England itself it's no problem to find anything food wise or vegetable wise - if you go to the international markets you find everything from Pakistan to everywhere, I went there, it's amazing, efficient and cheap.

Q. Where is it?

It's in London.

Q. Oh, so you travel to London?

Yes in the first to explore, if we can bring it, it's worth it, not worth it, it depends. It's not worth it because we are not big I mean restaurant or something where we need to cook a lot, so its not worth it because of petrol and time, and all these things. So we think it's the local businesses who are specialising in that are better for us, and we pay more, a little bit but its okay.

Q. Yes, thank you. How much competition did you have, were there other restaurants offering either halal or...?

Yes of course, there are a lot of take-aways and a lot of people selling halal, and all these things, but always in my experience, and any restaurant, any kind of restaurant that opens and provides food, it's a competition, doesn't matter what the kind of food it is. Doesn't matter, anyone who opens is taking part but, yes, of course when you're talking about Southernhay and Princesshay, and you're talking about the new shops, big names - Costa - you're talking about the Spanish, the Italian, Bella and these restaurant all have their customers, they have their own but what makes us stay in the market in the competition - it's the kind of food nobody could do it out there, neither the takeaways or the big chains, we are different in the kind of food we are providing. We don't import it like the other chains in Princesshay, bring it from Spain or by aeroplane and then provide everything, they don't even benefit the local economy by the way and that's very important.

They have to buy locally so they can recycle the jobs for the farmers, for the people around who provide organic and these things and try to sell the farmers all these things to the people because they bring everything frozen from outside and they are selling it here but because we are, as I said, our ethic, is different, that we cook it, we provide it here fresh ingredients, fresh everything, people like it and then we stayed in the competition, yes - sometimes go up, sometimes go down, but we stay at the level to cover ourself and make some small change, it's ok. That's what makes us different from the others and we sustain the competition. And then the last ten years, I tell you, the cafés and restaurants in Exeter have grown up 100% before 2000 or more even and in one mile around you could find hundreds of cafes. And the latest addition, one in Queensway and the one in Princesshay, the Japanese one, Sushi and these things - and Robi in Queensway - it's

very expensive, very stylish. But still we have some customers around coming, so it's okay.

Q. [Laughs] Stylish...only shame about the food.

The food is a different story and we are proud to be number 6 in the chart in the Trip Advisor, as the quality of food and kind of food which people like, through Facebook - and we are on the Trip Advisor UK, official one for restaurants and hotels, and we are happy with that in Exeter.

Q. Can you tell us about the mosque?

What do you want to know?

Q. When you came it was already there in the 1980's, was it already established?

I don't have direct involvement, because they have a committee looking after the mosque and those things.

Q. So you just went there?

Yes, just as any Muslim goes to pray. If they want help we can give them a hand, but I don't have any involvement in the creation, but always we are there for them if they ask anything.

Q. So why did you come back to Exeter from London?

When I moved to London in 1990, (89-90) I left my kids here, I have three children, three boys and one girl, and my wife. I didn't want to take them to London, to be honest, it was very difficult for them school-wise and the education here was very good, it's like a private school in London, in Exeter.

Q. Where did they go to school?

All four of them went to St. Sidwell's school which was a very good school to be honest at the time and is still I think - I do appreciate their work - in the 80's they looked after the children very well. Me and my wife we had good relations with the Head teacher at the time and the teachers, and my four of them went there. And then four of them went to St. Thomas High School at the time, not Exe College, which used to be St. Thomas High School. But my daughter she started here at St Sidwell's, and then we moved across the river, and we moved her to Montgomery school.

Q. Okay, that's a private college?

No, no, it's a public one, but almost like the best of the best to be honest - it's on Okehampton Road down Exwick, very good school, and if you compare this with London, at the time me and my wife talked about that, either take them to London where there is no special attention for the students as a whole, the classroom was crowded, so Exeter in comparison with London and schools in London, it's much much better - the public school here is like a private school, I believe, not all of them, of course there is one, two, three, four - depends, but generally it's okay we didn't have a problem with the kids around in the

school or til they finished college. They went to University and then graduated from university, all four of them.

Q. Was it Exeter University?

No, one from Cardiff, one from Portsmouth and two from Bristol. They don't want Exeter, for reason they don't want to stay at home. We gave them the experience. One of them is the Creative Director of the BBC last month, which I am proud. The other two, one has his own company, Media Recruitment, and the other one he is Chartered Accountant and he wants to open this month his own company, left where he worked in the city, and he wants to concentrate on opening his own business

Q. Are they in Exeter?

No, no, in London. I have four successful children, Alhamdulillah.

Q. A lot of people in London would see schools in Exeter as being monocultural, very narrow not exposing kids to the range of cultures you find in Britain at the moment, and they would say that's quite impoverished.

I don't agree with that. The experience I have from my kids in the schools - they are bright, respectable. I have two things to tell you. The youngest son I have Mohammed he was 7 and the daughter about 4, three years between them, and when she started school they had assembly every morning, and the Headteacher knew they were Muslim - so they can participate in the assembly if they want, they gave them the choice, and they asked me and I told them 'No, you can go and, don't sing, but listen, learn' and they did this. My daughter she doesn't know, 4 years old at the time and she starts singing.

Q. [laughs]

And my son which is 7 years old at the back, playing, because he doesn't go to assembly and he allowed from the Headteacher, he went from the back and went to his sister and told her: 'you shouldn't sing you can listen but you don't sing' and she is 4 years said 'Why?' And he said 'I don't know, it's because you are a Muslim and they sing it for Jesus, which we don't sing - but we do respect. 'And what means that?' she doesn't know, he told her 'I don't know what means that but your Dad knows so you go later and ask him, it's ok'.

The other example, I don't see through these years in the school any clashes - either between Islam, Christianity, Judaism and the kids they have very [?] difference still today from their English students with them, and one of them teacher now he is - the other day came and bought Falafal from me and he asked me 'are you Yassa's dad?' And I told him yes - 'He used to be my friend and so on, so on, I don't know where he is now. We finished college together and he went to university' and my kids still they come to Exeter to actually see their friends they created during their school years. So I don't see the people, the teachers – in my experience - they are narrow minded or strict or enforcing their opinion on any of my kids. Even in the high school, it was Ramadan and my daughter she's fasting and she went to school. You know, students when they come lunch time they open packed lunch and she doesn't have pack lunch, and the students there they told her 'Are you punished? You don't have your lunch?' And she said 'no, I am not punished, but because we are Muslim we have to fast' and the students they don't understand it 'what fast? Okay we give you from our food, if you're punished, okay no worries, we'll give you from our food' - - 'no I am not punished I am just fasting!' [Laugh]. So they told the

teacher, the teacher brought all the class and she explained what fasting is, what Ramadan is for Muslims and told to all the students you have to watch Yasmine because she might dehydrate or faint or something if she's fasting and no food, no drink - it was summertime *and these things - so my daughter tells me they used to play when it's break and everyone fighting each other and so on, and all of them they stopped playing and everyone walking like that [Dr. Rashid gets up to demonstrate] looking at her yeah [laughter] - might she faint, might she dehydrate, you see. And that's giving you a feeling of caring teacher, and even the students they don't understand, including my daughter anyway, what is the whole meaning of fasting and these things, but to show you the respect of other people's beliefs and other people...

By the time my first kid was playing rugby and he used to be at the college, he was the Captain of the Rugby of his age under 16's, under 18's. All English people playing with him, I don't see antagonisation 'you are bloody foreigner' or 'you are Muslim' or anything you are our captain. And the same with the third one, he was captain of Devon - sorry Wesam was Captain of Devon in Rugby, and Mohammed was Captain of Devon Football, and they are playing and there was no attitude or racism or they felt they were offended by anyone, and they accepted them because they grew up together, the same team, the same people - they grow up together. Other people might see something else, to me it was not assimilation - I can't be English to assimilate and be like them, go to the pub to drink, which I do respect for them, I go to the pub, drinking coffee, drinking tea, socialising with people, that's ok but integration is different to assimilation. Here one of the things I think, for ethnic minorities, they have to integrate within the society, they can't isolate themselves. They don't know the culture of the people they are living between, they have to understand it and from here, my family, I try to give them the education of the English culture so they don't feel very apart from it. That's why, their lives which is thanks to God, they are very successful. Their friends are still English, they don't isolate themselves in ghettoes and refuse everything is no good for us, it is mutual for between both, the minorities themselves and the English. But when you open your heart, you open your mind; understand the others and they can understand you.

Q. So how would you define English culture?

Any people in the world they have their own culture, to them they are happy with it, of course as with any culture, like Arabic culture, there is bad and good, ancient and the new. When I came to live here a lot of people they don't like anything, because it's hard to adapt to a new culture when you have your own culture. The problem is not adapting as a human being, but to understand you can't enforce your own culture on other people and the other people never thought to enforce their culture on you. I invite a lot of English people into my house. The first thing, I like to invite you but I can't provide you with drink, because it's not allowed in Islam to provide drink, but I don't mind you bring your bottle and drink it, that's understanding and mutual. And people when they come, they don't bring their bottle, they do respect me. I respect them by telling them you can bring your bottle and drink it, but don't expect me to open it for you and pour it for you, you open it you drink it! They come, they eat, they don't drink.

I have a friend whose son married an English girl. When they have the wedding, and you know, and food, and everything and celebration, the Englishmen drink, but because the guy he is a Muslim and his family Muslim, they sacrificed and they don't drink, they don't order food - even there is a pub near where the ceremony was, they can go and drink, but they prefer not to because they don't want to hurt the feelings, even the other guy said it's okay with him if they want to buy it, buy it. The same happened with my son when he got

married...pay for the food, the ceremony, everything but the drink we didn't pay for it. And people do respect that, do understand that. So when you see the English culture, I think it is polite, it's good, it has its roots in respecting other people and they don't enforce their culture on the people who live here. My neighbour doesn't enforce it on me, never enforce it on me. I lived in all parts of the society one middle class and up, one lower class. Both I don't see them - even they have some bad words, they talk to their children with it, not me or [Waifa?], they keep themselves down, not loud - even the lowest of the society. So I think people they have their own culture, I do respect it and they respect my identity, my culture so I don't see any clashes between this and there. And they try to learn and we try to learn from them also. They have good manners, good culture, the British, if you are in Wales or Scotland, Ireland, England. And that's the nature of human beings, to be openminded and to take and give. I don't see any clashes. If you don't like to go to the pub, don't go you can meet in cafes or somewhere.

Q: What do you think about politics in this country, do you support it?

Politics it's art - it's all about interests. So any politics in this country - you might agree or not agree - it's the interest of the nation, you see. Here I can say I know wrong-minded people, they think if they have a problem in their own country then they blame imperialism and so, and so, and so. That's wrong...What politics in west world in Britain and America, we don't understand from the third world perspective view, they don't understand how it works, and here's the problem. Because they have parties established for hundreds of years and these parties they operate within nation, to influence any decision you have to make a pressure group - within the party to influence the leadership of the party, to make a decision which you want.

So now, take me as a Palestinian, when we talk here, I have a lot of question marks about the British politics towards the Middle East, towards Palestine and Europe as a whole and America and even Russia. To me it's double standards. My countries problem was created by the British anyway. The Balfour declaration they give my country to a third party which they don't have the right to do it. I considered it as dehumanisation, because if you don't own the cafe you don't give it to anybody, it's my cafe. You can't just say, Richard, here's the cafe, it's for you. You don't own it, why do you give it? To us the British government and the Balfour declaration gave Palestine to a third party which she can't own. Britain entrusted in the 1920s by the League of Nations to be a mandatory in Palestine and she gave it back as it was. Instead she created Israel as a state in 1948. Here when I talk now about the Palestinians they have right to a compromise. They would expect [phone rings] at least a State, because the only people in the world stateless are the Palestinians. So when we talk about politics, about human rights, about this - I still find its offensive and it applies to certain people but not applied to all people, to be honest with you.

If Israel go and hit Gaza and kill hundreds and hundreds and hundreds by phosphoric, by any means of weaponry, Israel defends itself. When a Palestinian go blow himself, which I don't support anyway...because he's right to a point, he can't [pause] he even can't think, because they took his homeland, they took his fields, he can't farm it, he can't give his children anything, or work or anything, to be like any human being living, eating, drinking, playing with his kids. He can't and then he blow himself, I don't see he's a terrorist [customer enters] He's desperate, nobody thought of him as human, to give him his right in a state, to work, to build his own thing, his dream - he can't buy a bicycle for his kids or a TV or something. They pushed him to the corner to be desperate, to the end - life and death, it's equal. So what is the advantage, the advantage if he is killed and he Muslim -

by the way our people are mixed between Muslim and Christians, and both they kill each other [corrects himself] explode themselves, even the Christians. The only thing they think about is Paradise, go not to the hell, he's going to paradise.

Q: Hashim is going to serve some clients so we will continue later

[Interview continues]

Even though the Arabs generally, because they don't know how to function, how to channel your objection to a certain policy which you like or don't - that makes things very difficult to understand for minorities in this country, the best thing is to be involved in politics within the parties so you can channel it in the right way by creating influence group within each party. Not just to object of course... a lot of things you don't like, during Blair government, for example, a million people went out to say 'no!' to the Iraqi War but in a democratic way, but he doesn't listen - but they expressed their view within this and they created atmosphere to influence the public opinion at the time through Respect and this organisation - that's the right thing to do, you see, but still he is Prime Minister, and he command majority and so, and so...that's what we need to learn, to channel our views through the democratic institution within the country, to express our opinions. I remember once, what's his name? He used to be Minister for Foreign Affairs...

[Q: Ben Bradshaw]

during Blair's and he spoke something about Palestine which I don't like myself, but we wrote a letter for him and let my daughter and sons to write letter saying you said this and that's wrong, and he answered, no, my opinion wasn't like that, my opinion was like that [slaps table] it was a good thing to let him know that we are here citizens and we have the right to question your views by sending this letter, I am not going to elect you next time, that's kind of a pressure for him and I know twenty people or thirty people who are not going to elect Labour - that's the way we can.

But the problem most of the minorities, they are very far from the political culture of the British, they are not involved directly or indirectly in the political issue. So we can't blame the politician who has effective pressure from them - other groups or minority groups. So when we say yeah, it is double standards for me for example, but if I want to correct this according to my opinion I have to channel it through the right way. And from here the contradiction comes in, the minority group, they don't understand how to integrate within in this - they are a small minority of course, within the Liberal Democrat, within the Labour, within the Conservative - small minority, for example, there's a Pakistani lady, she used to be Chairman of the Conservative Party, and she is now Minister of Foreign Affairs, so she is good, of course she represents the Conservative point of view but she can also affect the views within the Conservative when they ask her about countries like Pakistan, like this or this or this...but when you are far away and then you say ah! I have nothing to do with this, here's the problem, you see. So as politics in this country might you like it, might you not...

[Pause. serving customer - interviewers talking]

[Resume]

So that's why I said it's the political spectrum here, of course never politics according to your wishes, or to my wishes but we have to channel it because we have kind of interests in politics but everyone has to channel it in the right ways, not in an extremist way which I

don't like, I don't agree - not naive way, also I don't agree you see. You have to channel it through the right...when I see extremists, I don't mean in expressing your opinion, no, I don't mean that, I mean some people resorting to not peaceful means, it's not good, I don't like it and I think it shouldn't be used. Because not everyone in the country with the government and everything...a lot of clashes in the interests, in tax, in benefits, in everything there but not everyone wants to resort to violence, to resort to anarchy, to resort to [?] shouldn't be allowed. Express their opinions as they wish, in democratic ways, in peaceful ways, with respect to the others opinions.

Q: Do you think there are any limits to people's rights to express their opinions? Do think there should be some agreed boundaries? I was just thinking because, for example, in Germany they have a law which criminalises Holocaust Denial.

That's (more or less) not a law, it's a political accommodation - it's a political accommodation because anti-Semitism, if you want to say something you could refer to it as anti-Semitism. For example, if you say, I am against the Israeli building and your house is on Palestinian land, and you express or me expressing my views against the law and international law - ah! He is anti-Semitism, he against...

Q: That's an old argument that Zionists always want to blur the boundary between Zionism and the events

Yes, so you see, it is political because they pressurize the West as anti-Semitism, so anything you want to express, even if you want to guestion the Holocaust itself, who created it, who done it and why, what's the motives - is it Hitler, is it Germany, is it Europe? Or is it Mossad before it be an Israeli state? If you want to go on that...anti-Semitism! It's nothing in history to question, you can question anything. Like a Muslim you want to question anything in Islam and he come and tell you ah! it's haram, you are kaffir notbeliever, and so on...Excuse me I am asking a question, you can't come and tell I am not a good Muslim...for asking questions because everyone needs knowledge and Islam is created on knowledge and you are talking nonsense, so how I become suddenly not a Moslem and not believer and so and so...this is the same you see, this extremism, if you want to put boundaries on things, then you stop your mind to create and if we say boundaries, you can't question the Holocaust, because it is anti-Semitism, yes - then it comes tomorrow that you can't criticise Netanyahu because he is building and he is taking the land of the Palestinians and because he is building a wall, an isolation wall, taking the land of the Palestinians and leave them like they did yesterday in their wall this part near Jericho, where they sent all the people out of their homes and they confiscated everything. and you say ah! because you are talking about Israeli State in negative way, then you are anti-Semitic, you should be punished and go to the court and so on. The same as Islam, or Christianity or Judaism, so I don't think, I don't think. But the limitation with respect, that means when you criticise something, you should respect that, the other opinion, because this law itself, some of the third world countries they took it and put it in the heart of democracy they want to create.

For example, take Jordan; in this law, if you criticise anyone in the government or chief of tribe they call it in Arabic [Arabic] "the length of the tank" and they can take you to court and put you in prison between 2 or 3 years. If they said the King is doing wrong, he's taking bloody money and playing gambling with it and people they say we want to build our hospital and they put the money in their pocket that means criticising [Arabic] "length of the tank", and this law puts you in prison, but the reality is he is taking the money, so how can I criticise him, which way? If we want to say 'there is limitation then you come to the

question of democracy and here we become a facade democracy' like third world countries, but if you express your opinion with all respect and facts, and references, you can create, why not? Why I can't say - look you went to Iraq, wrong, nothing you will gain, sooner or later. Afghanistan is wrong, you keep the boys safe, the country safe, of course you criticise Bin Laden and these things, you criticise this, you try to find the solution - for now they are in Mali, do you think they are going to win?

[Qs: No]

Of course not but, this will cost more and more, you see, that's a problem because they think okay we can play tribes each other, racism against each other, Arabs against Tuareg, Tuareg against Africans, African against so and so. And then we mix it all together like they mix it in Afghanistan, they mix it in Pakistan, but how long this? So it is very difficult, I don't think limitation stop you from giving if you think it is the right suggestion for any political issue. To me this totally different because all limitation is in the third world country and it creates dictatorship and it create a stronghold of the society. [Pause...chuckles]

Q: Thank you very much, last one, do you want to give any message?

My message to all people, I lived here in Exeter, Exeter is a nice place, it's a good place, people nice, friendly. I would love in my part, in my friends from the community either one of them English or minority groups, to understand each other better by integrating. I am not saying assimilation, you are a Pakistani, you are English or Irish, it doesn't matter to me [pause] it's citizen of this country, it's... I like to understand others to socialise, to create more vision for the society, not hatred, not misunderstanding each other. Just try to communicate, communication is good. Communication makes vision, makes understanding, and integration; don't isolate yourself as a minority, don't hide behind politics, religion, and so on...because we're all believers, we're all human beings, we learn from each other, we understand each other. Don't create this space, just, put your hand and like we say 'Salam Alaikum' 'Peace with you' always, and you create a better society without hatred, without misunderstanding each other. Isolation on the other hand does not bring anything for our future generation if they want to live in this country.

Q. That was a very good message, thank you very much...

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