

Independent Asylum Commission

CONDUCTING A NATIONWIDE REVIEW OF THE UK ASYLUM SYSTEM

IN ASSOCIATION WITH THE **CITIZEN** ORGANISING FOUNDATION

PRESS RELEASE

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NATIONWIDE REVIEW OF ASYLUM SYSTEM TOLD THAT DETAINEES ARE “TREATED LIKE ANIMALS”

A national “citizens’ enquiry” into the UK asylum system this week heard evidence of serious violations of the human rights of asylum seekers within removal centres run by the Home Office.

On March 29th the Independent Asylum Commission held the second of seven regional public hearings and roadshows in the Muslim Cultural Heritage Centre, West London. The hearing focused on the role of detention and immigration removal centres, which have seen disturbances and a high rate of self-harm and suicide in recent years. Asylum seekers can be detained indefinitely by the Home Office at any stage of the asylum process. Over 30,000 people were detained in the UK in 2005 and almost 2,000 of those were children.

Nine of the Commissioners chosen to lead the enquiry, including former High Court judge Sir John Waite, Ifath Nawaz, the President of the Association of Muslim Lawyers, and UN refugee agency representative Jacqueline Parlevliet, heard testimony from a dozen witnesses including Her Majesty’s Inspectorate of Prisons, chaplaincy staff from within detention centres and charities working with detainees.

Ex-detainees gave evidence from behind a screen to protect their identity and talked from their own experiences about the lack of access to legal representation; poor welfare provision and ill-treatment by staff; poor conditions in the centres themselves; high rates of self-harm and suicide and poor healthcare; and the impact on detained children and families.

Helen Ireland, Co-ordinator of the Association of Visitors to Immigration Detainees, expressed grave concern over the high number of incidents of self-harm and suicide in immigration removal centres and blamed poor living conditions.

Ms Ireland said:

“Our visitors – local volunteers who befriend detainees – see the profound hopelessness, despair and suicidal urges caused by the experience of detention. Visitors are very concerned about the incidents of self-harm. In Haslar

immigration removal centre there are thirty men sharing a dormitory with a television set - it is not the right way to treat people.”

Faith, an asylum seeker from Zimbabwe who was detained for seven months, complained about the standard of treatment from staff at the removal centre, and how it had left her angry, confused and anxious that she was being treated badly in a country where she had sought protection.

Faith said:

“It is more than just physical torture, it is mental torture too. The staff made you feel like you don’t belong. I was treated like an animal.”

William, an asylum seeker from Uganda, told the Commissioners how he was denied his medication for high blood pressure during detention, and collapsed unconscious for two hours as a result.

Commenting on another occasion when the Home Office tried to remove him, William said:

“The handcuffs were too tight. I tried to explain but the Home Office staff would not listen. It was incredibly painful. A flight attendant came to my rescue and asked the guards to take me off the plane when she saw the blood oozing from my wrists onto the floor. Another detainee I knew was denied medication for blood pressure for so long - three days I think – that she went green.”

Dr Mraish, the Muslim chaplain at Colnbrook removal centre and formerly the chaplain at Harmondsworth, commented on the treatment of detainees by staff at Harmondsworth, which saw major disturbances last year:

“We know what happened there recently, as a result of provoking the detainees.”

Rev’d Larry Wright, formerly the chaplain to staff and detainees at Yarl’s Wood removal centre, explained that detention centre staff were also under great pressure.

Rev’d Wright said:

“I am concerned about the prison-like regime. Whenever people have temporary power over others – as detention centre staff have over detainees - there is the temptation to abuse it. So it is essential to have more outside monitors to prevent abuse.”

Peter Booth, National Council Member for the Independent Monitoring Boards, that monitor conditions in immigration removal centres on behalf of the Home Secretary, agreed that conditions in some detention centres were unacceptable: “I think that Haslar removal centre should be closed.”

Mr Booth continued:

“Independent Monitoring Boards perform a vital watchdog role on behalf of Ministers and the public to ensure that people are held decently and with humanity. We are concerned by health provision – although all centres are well covered for coughs and colds, they are not adequately covered for HIV and TB, and they are severely lacking in mental health provision.”

Gill Butler, a befriender at the Yarl's Wood centre, emphasised the impact on detainees' mental health and the failure of the authorities to acknowledge severe psychiatric issues. Ms Butler cited the case of a Ugandan torture victim with Post Traumatic Stress Disorder who was detained at Yarl's Wood and suffered horrific consequences.

Ms Butler said:

"A lady I befriended had suffered incredibly in Uganda. She was a highly intelligent woman, but after her release she was unable to walk, eat, drink or look after herself. She was also mute. This was as a direct result of her detention at Yarl's Wood. And yet the medical centre at Yarl's Wood insisted she had no medical concerns. Home Office guidelines say that torture victims should not be detained – but the Immigration and Nationality Directorate is not following those guidelines."

Eileen Bye, from Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Prisons, the body that inspects immigration removal centres, said that although there had been some improvements in recent years, there had been an insufficient improvement in the welfare of detainees, and criticised the fact that removal centres still lacked a framework for the welfare of children. She called for better structures and staff training to reduce the high rate of detainee self-harm and suicide.

Commenting on the 'shunting' of detainees between centres, Ms Bye said:

"The movement of detainees between immigration removal centres by the authorities is also a serious problem. Within the space of just a few days, one detainee we interviewed was moved from Dungavel in Scotland, to Colnbrook near Heathrow, then to Lindholme near Doncaster, and then back to down to Harmondsworth - which is right next to Colnbrook! This is disorientating and means the detainee loses contact with their friends, family, property and legal advisers."

Paul Nettleship, a duty solicitor at Harmondsworth immigration removal centre, informed the Commissioners that there were serious flaws in the detained fast-track system operating there. He cited one case in which a female Ugandan asylum seeker with injuries consistent with torture was denied asylum under the detained fast-track system. The Home Office broke its own guidelines by failing to pass on vital information to the decision maker and by arranging her interview with two male staff. She was eventually granted asylum after a judicial review found that she not been allowed time to gather sufficient medical evidence.

Mr Nettleship said:

"The Home Office fight tooth and nail to keep to the timetable of the detained fast-track system, but this compromises the integrity of the system. There is a culture of inflexibility in the fast-track system which leads to vulnerable asylum seekers like my client being denied protection. The detained fast-track process is a gateway to injustice."

John, an ex-detainee from Zimbabwe, had his asylum claim assessed under the detained fast track process in a fortnight. He was told to find a solicitor to represent him, but was refused representation when he explained that he was in the detained fast-track process, because of restrictions on legal aid for asylum cases.

John said:

“When I went through the detained fast-track I felt like they were giving me a direction – straight back to my country. There was no way they could verify my story in two weeks. I was so naïve - I thought the Home Office would consider my claim fairly but they don’t want to hear my story.”

George Mwangi, an ex-detainee who was released on bail when he drew media attention to his case, called for the closure of Immigration Removal Centres:

“I was detained for eight months and that cost the taxpayer £50,000 just for me. That money could be better spent. And why is it that a suspected terrorist can be detained for a maximum of only 28 days, and yet an asylum seeker, who has committed no crime but seeks protection, can be locked up indefinitely?”

Trude, an asylum seeker detained in Yarl’s Wood with her two children, spoke of the poor hygiene leading to skin diseases among children, the lack of proper education facilities and having to share a bed with her ten-year-old son.

Trude said:

“We spent five and a half months in detention. It was extremely stressful for me as a mother, and my young children cried every day. Our children were locked up like prisoners. Which type of a human could keep a child locked up all day?”

Sir John Waite, Co-Chair of the Independent Asylum Commission, said:

“At this second hearing of the Commission, we got a unique insight into the humanity and inhumanity existing side-by-side in the detention system. My fellow Commissioners and I heard evidence that raises real concerns about the UK’s asylum system and raises real questions for the Home Office and those who run the centres. And that is why our enquiry is so timely. But this is a fair and impartial Commission and this is just the start - we know that this is a difficult issue and we will be seeking a response from the Home Office which will also be used as evidence. We will be doing our utmost to listen to all sides before we publish our report and recommendations next year, and encourage those working in the detention estate and the asylum system to contact us to give us their side of the story.”

For further details contact Jonathan Cox, IAC Co-ordinator: 07919 484066.

Notes for editors:

- Photographs of the 29th March West London Hearing are available – contact chris@cof.org.uk
- The Independent Asylum Commission is conducting a nationwide review of the UK asylum system.
- The IAC is independent of government and the voluntary sector, and is accountable to citizens.
- The Commission is keen to hear from any individual or organisation who is concerned about the asylum system – from those who believe it is too generous to those who believe it is not providing adequate protection for refugees. Information on how to submit evidence can be found at www.independentasylumcommission.org.uk.