

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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CITIZENS' ASYLUM ENQUIRY HEARS EVIDENCE OF TRAUMA CAUSED BY 'DAWN RAIDS'

A national "citizens' enquiry" into the UK asylum system this week heard evidence of the trauma caused to asylum seekers and local communities by the use of 'dawn raids' to remove refused asylum seekers.

On June 5th the Independent Asylum Commission held its fourth public hearing and roadshow in the Scottish Trades Union Congress in Glasgow. The hearing focused on the impact of so-called 'dawn raids' – early morning removals by the Borders and Immigration agency.

Three of the Commissioners chosen to lead the enquiry, including former High Court judge Sir John Waite, Canon Professor Nick Sagovsky of Westminster Abbey and Jacqueline Parlevliet from the UNHCR – the UN refugee agency - heard testimony from a dozen witnesses including the Scottish Refugee Council, Scottish Executive, Scotland's Commissioner for Children and Young People, the European Council on Refugees and Exiles, local campaigners, and UNISON.

Local asylum seekers and refugees also gave evidence and talked from their own experiences about how removal had affected them, their families and the wider community.

Mary, an asylum seeker from Uganda, explained how she and her children had twice experienced dawn raids in Glasgow. She explained that they were woken up and forced to dress in front of the immigration officers. They were then transported from Scotland to the Yarl's Wood removal centre in Bedfordshire in a cage in the back of a van, given no substantial food and little water:

Mary said:

"My children and I were treated like animals in that cage. We were hungry and had to watch while the guards ate at a petrol station. But the detention centre was even worse – we felt like criminals."

Mary broke down as she recounted her experience of the second dawn raid after her family was released from Yarl's Wood. The terrified family hid in a neighbour's flat and heard the immigration officers banging on the door of their home.

□ Independent Asylum Commission, 112 Cavell St, London, E1 2JA. □
□ 020 7375 1658 □ jonathan.cox@cof.org.uk □
□ www.independentasylumcommission.org.uk □

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Mary reported long-term psychological effects on her children:
“My kids are now afraid of authority figures – they run away from policemen and anyone who reminds them of the men who came to remove us and who guarded us in detention. We all live in fear of being deported to face persecution in Uganda.”

Kathleen Marshall, Scotland’s Commissioner for Children and Young People, explained that although asylum was not a devolved issue, she felt a deep concern for the impact of dawn raids on children. She criticized the UK government’s reservation to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, which meant that the needs of the child were not considered paramount in immigration matters.

Kathleen Marshall said:
“You can reserve powers in Westminster, but you cannot reserve the welfare of children – if they are in Scotland they are my responsibility. I have spent time meeting the children of asylum seekers, and their peers in communities and schools, and I am very concerned at the impact that removals have on the welfare of children.”

Roger, an asylum seeker from Cameroon speaking on behalf of the Scottish Refugee Policy Forum, informed the Commissioners of the tragic consequences that the trauma surrounding removals had led to in Scotland. He explained the frustration that many asylum seekers felt, being unable to work and get on with their lives, and with the threat of removal hanging over them.

Roger said:
“People fleeing persecution thought they would be safe in Scotland. But many have been scarred by the experience, or worse. One Tibetan asylum seeker set himself on fire and died of his injuries. Another asylum seeker jumped out of their tower block. There are many other people who are driven to this by fear of removal.”

Euan Girvan, a teacher at Drumchapel High School, explained to the Commissioners that the removal of a child had a much wider effect on the community and the child’s peers.

Mr Girvan said:
“When a child is removed and does not turn up to school one day it is like a ripple in a pond – it affects all the people around them. Some pupils in Glasgow are now receiving counseling to help them overcome the trauma of

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losing a fellow pupil. It is an emotion very similar to bereavement, and schools are not set up to deal with that sort of trauma.”

Sir John Waite, Co-Chair of the Independent Asylum Commission, said: “At this fourth hearing of the Commission, we got a unique insight into the impact of removals – which are an integral part of our asylum system – on children, families and communities in Glasgow. My fellow Commissioners and I heard evidence that raises real concerns about the UK’s asylum system that we will be following up with the authorities. This is a fair and impartial Commission and this is just the start - we know there are difficulties involved 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 so I urge people on all sides of the debate to write to and email us with your views on this issue.”

Commission Co-ordinator, Jonathan Cox, said:

“The Commission was impressed by the strength of feeling on this issue in Scotland. We have heard of several major issues that need resolving and that we will bear in mind when framing our recommendations. I hope that Scottish Executive, as well as the Home Office, will take note of our findings and their implications for Scotland when we publish our report in 2008.”

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

Notes for editors:

- 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 organization 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