

Independent Asylum Commission

CONDUCTING A NATIONWIDE REVIEW OF THE UK ASYLUM SYSTEM

IN ASSOCIATION WITH THE **CITIZEN** ORGANISING FOUNDATION

PRESS RELEASE

27/03/07

CITIZENS' ASYLUM ENQUIRY TO HEAR EXPERIENCE OF ASYLUM DETENTION

A national citizens' enquiry into the UK asylum system will hear evidence from those with direct experience of immigration detention at a public hearing in West London on Thursday 29th March.

The Independent Asylum Commission is coming to London to collect evidence on the detention of asylum seekers for an impartial citizens' enquiry into the UK asylum system. The Commission will produce a report in 2008 that is expected to produce recommendations for reform of the asylum system that are fair as well as forceful, and realistic as well as humane.

The detention of asylum seekers is one of the most controversial aspects of the asylum system in the UK, and the recent disturbances at Campsfield and Harmondsworth removal centres have raised further questions about its use.

The London hearing is the second of seven public hearings across the UK. An august team of Commissioners, including former Chief Inspector of Prisons, Lord Ramsbotham, ex-Immigration Judge the Countess of Mar, a bishop and human rights experts, will hear first-hand testimony from:

- six ex-detainees including a former hunger-striker at Harmondsworth and a mother detained with her children;
- a representative of Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Prisons, which inspects removal centres and has published a series of highly critical reports;
- a solicitor providing legal advice to asylum seekers whose claims are processed as part of the detained fast-track process;

- the befriender of a Ugandan rape and torture survivor whose mental collapse in detention led to an inquiry by the Chief Inspector of Prisons;
- a member of the Independent Monitoring Boards - independent and unpaid volunteers appointed by Home Office Ministers to monitor the day-to-day life in removal centres and ensure that proper standards of care and decency are maintained;
- a former chaplain at a removal centre;
- the head of operations for an NGO based at a removal centre;
- charities working directly with detainees - the Association of Visitors to Immigration Detainees and Bail for Immigration Detainees.

The West London hearing will be hosted at the Muslim Cultural Heritage Centre by *West London Citizens*, a broad-based coalition of faith groups, trade unions and community organisations. The Independent Asylum Commission was set up following an enquiry into Lunar House, the headquarters of the Immigration and Nationality Directorate, by *South London Citizens*, whose report, "A humane service for global citizens" was published in November 2005.

Sir John Waite, a former Judge of the High Court and Co-chair of the Commission said:

"The government is on record as accepting that the detention of asylum seekers is something that should be done "with humanity and dignity". At the Commission's hearing on 29th March we shall be receiving evidence as to how far that high aim is being achieved in practice. I shall look forward to learning the answers to questions about the length of detention, the quality of accommodation, the treatment of children, the opportunities for access to friends and legal advisers, and the degree of transparency in the detention process."

Ifath Nawaz, President of the Association of Muslim Lawyers and Co-chair of the Commission said:

"As we embark on our second public hearing, we look forward to receiving evidence on the issue of detention as experienced by asylum seekers. Whilst having heard the points of views of the Government representatives and the NGOs, the Commissioners are particularly keen to hear from those with personal experiences in this area of detention and how it has impacted on their applications, their perspective of the system and how it works and whether or not it was helpful or a hindrance."

Jonathan Cox, Co-ordinator of the Independent Asylum Commission, said:

“This is the first independent review of asylum policy. We are going out of our way to listen to all sides of the debate, all around the country. But the public hearings are just the tip of the iceberg. We are already receiving dozens of written submissions - from asylum seekers reporting inhumane treatment right through to citizens reporting abuses of an asylum system which they perceive to be too generous. I encourage anyone who wishes to report an abuse of the asylum system or has examples of inhumane treatment of asylum seekers to respond to the call for evidence on our website: www.independentasylumcommission.org.uk.”

The West London Public Hearing begins at 14:30 on 29th March and the Independent Asylum Commission Roadshow – a promotional event for the Commission featuring art produced by detainees, drama and poetry – begins at 18:45 on the same day at the same venue.

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

Notes for editors:

- **Event: Independent Asylum Commission Public Hearing and Roadshow**
Date: **29th March 2007 (Public hearing 14:30-17:30; Roadshow 18:45-20:30)**
Location: **Muslim Cultural Heritage Centre, 244 Acklam Road, W10 5YG (close to Westbourne Park tube).**
- 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.
- Commissioners and the Commission’s Co-ordinator will be available for comment, as will some of those giving evidence. Journalists are welcome to attend either event. Please contact Jonathan Cox 07919 484066 or jonathan.cox@cof.org.uk to book a place in the media gallery or to arrange an interview.

- For information on the Commission's first Public Hearing and Roadshow in Birmingham on 31st January 2007, see the News and Media section at: www.independentasylumcommission.org.uk.
- For more information about the Commission contact chris@cof.org.uk or see www.independentasylumcommission.org.uk.