

Autumn 2007

Detention Deportation & Demoralisation



Dignity Not Detention

Local people, trade unionists, faith groups, students and community organisations marched from Sheffield to Doncaster arriving at Lindholme removal centre on 28 October. The march was organised by local people who want an end to the detention of people who are seeking refuge in the UK and to draw attention to the fact that asylum seekers are not allowed to work. The route took protesters through areas of high unemployment to highlight everyone's right to work. Organiser Stuart Crosthwaite said "We want to remind ordinary people that inside Lindholme there are people who've risked their lives to come here, looking for a place of sanctuary after being persecuted at home."



Deporting People to Their Death

The International Day of Action Against Immigration Prisons on 22 September, saw people march in protest against the building of a new detention centre, developed in partnership with BAA Lynton on behalf of the Airport Property Partnership at Gatwick. In the UK, there are ten centres, seven of which are run by private companies contracted by the Home Office,

accommodating 2,506 detainees. Incidents of alleged abuse and mistreatment by staff, denial of medical care, and obstruction of legal process in the centres, are commonplace. Desperation has led detainees to go on hunger strike or even commit suicide.

Other protests took place in Crawley. Virgin Holiday premises were occupied because of Virgin's involvement in the deportation of asylum seekers to Nigeria. The gate of Group 4's offices - which runs Dungavel detention centre - was blockaded and a banner displayed which read "Group 4 Profit from Racist Prisons".

"We Are Like Fish Living in an Aquarium Suspended in the Ocean"

At the Trade Union Congress (TUC) this year, Kabwe, who has been seeking asylum since fleeing DR Congo in 2005, was asked to tell his story at the Anti Racism rally.

Born in Kasai province - home of the UDPS opposition party - he worked to house children orphaned by HIV in Katanga - home of the current Government tribe. A pogrom of his tribe led to his family fleeing to Kasai. His sister was killed when she protested and he and his wife were arrested and tortured. He escaped to England, was granted leave to remain but this was overturned when the Home Office appealed. With new evidence, he renewed his claim for asylum but has been waiting for a decision ever since.

Kabwe spoke of his experience since arriving in the UK: "I am grateful to this country for giving me protection. I am free from persecution. However, it has been difficult for me claiming asylum

continued on page 2

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continued from front page

in this country as I feel under a lot of pressure wondering about the safety of my family in Congo, waiting for a decision, having to sign at the Home Office, not being allowed to work, not even having money to buy things as I only have food vouchers for Morrisons. All of this stress has had an effect on my mental health and I am currently taking anti-depressants daily.

Before Tony Blair stepped down as Prime Minister, he claimed Britain was a blessed nation, and I believe this to be the case. However, if you are a blessed nation, you need to make sure you are being a blessing to those who live in it. I feel that asylum seekers are one group of people living in Britain who are not experiencing this blessing. One image I can think of is that we asylum seekers are like fish living in an aquarium that is suspended in the ocean. We can see through the glass at British life but we are trapped in the tank.

One way of dramatically improving the mental and physical wellbeing of asylum seekers in the UK would be to offer the opportunity for asylum seekers to work."

Trade Union Support

The TUC is supporting the Refugee Council campaign for those waiting for a decision on their asylum claim to have the right to work. Refugee Council Chief Executive Donna Covey pointed out that these people had lost everything and needed work to help re-build their lives.

Is Khartoum Safe?

A House of Lords tribunal has ruled that in principle, the government can deport Darfuri asylum seekers to the Sudanese capital Khartoum. This overrules an earlier court of appeal decision and states that sending refugees to camps in Darfur is not "unduly harsh". The Law Lords said it was "reasonable" to relocate three Darfuris who fled "severe persecution" in late 2004, to a safe part of Sudan. Lord Brown of Eaton-Under-Heywood's opinion is "Given that they can now safely be returned home, only proof that their lives on return would be quite simply intolerable... would entitle them to refugee status."

Campaigners maintain that black African Darfuris are not safe in any part of Sudan and that government security forces are targeting them even in Khartoum. The Home Office is reviewing evidence from the Aegis Trust that two Darfuris deported to Khartoum were tortured. Stephen Twigg, Aegis Trust campaigns director, said it was unlikely that any Darfuris would be deported in the immediate future "What we are saying to the government today is that they have got to look again at the country guidance with regard to Sudan."

Donna Covey of the Refugee Council said: "In light of the shocking reports of genocide in Darfur it is

appalling that the government is even considering sending those fleeing the violence back to Sudan. It is breathtaking hypocrisy for the Prime Minister to speak about the tragedy of Darfur at the same time as home office lawyers are seeking to forcibly return those who have asked for sanctuary in Britain. In a crisis that has produced more than two million refugees, only 675 Sudanese nationals applied for asylum in the UK last year. Moreover, there is worrying evidence of maltreatment and torture of people from Darfur being forcibly returned to Khartoum. We urge the government to take this into account"

Zimbabwe Update

On 6 March 2007 the Court of Appeal allowed a Zimbabwean to appeal against the decision that they could be safely returned. While the Asylum and Immigration Tribunal are reconsidering the case, people may be eligible for Section 4 support if they make a fresh claim based on this case.

Refugees who fled here from Zimbabwe using Malawian passports are being turned down for asylum and treated as if they come from Malawi. They are then removed to Malawi whereupon the Malawian authorities hand them over to the Zimbabwean regime.

XL Airways Announcement:

"... we operated one flight in February to DR Congo... without full understanding... we will not be operating any further flights of this nature ... (we) have sympathy for all dispossessed persons in the world..."

Refused Asylum Unlawfully

A High Court ruling in July decided that some people who claimed asylum prior to 2001 were refused Indefinite Leave to Remain (ILR) unlawfully. Decisions on cases that had already been received at that time, were delayed in order to meet government targets of processing new claims more speedily. When these old claims were eventually decided, post 2001 policies were applied resulting in negative decisions. If the old policies had been applied to these cases, some would have been granted ILR.

Since 2001, the people affected have been suffering unnecessarily, without any statutory support and living destitute or worse. The High Court recommended that this should be remedied by granting ILR to those where this applies. People affected should contact a solicitor or the Community Legal Service on 0845 345 4345 to find out if they are entitled to legal assistance for their case.

Disclosing Experiences of Sexual Violence

Many asylum seekers are refused leave to remain in the UK because the basis of their claim for asylum is not believed by the Borders and Immigration Agency (BIA). Sometimes this happens when someone declares that they are from a particular country but the BIA claim they are from elsewhere. A more complex area of concern is where refugees have experienced rape and other forms of sexual violence.

BIA interviews with asylum seekers consist of a series of questions and answers with little consideration of the trauma that lies behind the basis of an asylum seekers claim for refuge. It is not unusual for a woman who has been subjected to rape as a weapon of war, to be interviewed by a male Immigration Officer and male interpreter. Is it reasonable to expect the woman to talk about her experience in a matter of fact way to the BIA?

A study published in the British Journal of Psychiatry, entitled 'Impact of sexual violence on disclosure during Home Office interviews' has revealed critical insight into this issue. Those who have suffered sexual violence display severe Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, increased incidents of flashback (to the experience), avoidance of thoughts or feelings associated with the trauma, dissociative symptoms in which the person 'cuts off' from the feelings associated with the event, as well as greater feelings of shame. For example: "I tried to talk, but my mind kept wandering off. Everything seemed unreal to me. I found it hard to focus on the interview and answer questions."

Late or non-disclosure of the reason for claiming asylum is viewed by the BIA as a reason to doubt an asylum seeker's credibility. On the face of it, this doubt may seem acceptable, until you understand why. The research found that only half of those who participated in the study had told BIA officials about being the victim of sexual violence. These findings are likely to be very relevant to a large number of refugees coming to the UK who have experienced or witnessed torture and organised violence. Another reason for non-disclosure is that for many, discussion of sexual issues in their culture is taboo.

The researchers found that people's psychological states should be evaluated when assessing their ability to give a coherent personal history in an interview with officials. These factors need to be taken into account when judging asylum seekers' credibility based on the information they disclose.

Most asylum seekers experienced the asylum process - including the BIA interviews - as stressful and made them anxious because they feared deportation. Many need time to process past traumatic events and build up enough trust to reveal the pain and perceived shameful details of their experience.

The study questions the appropriateness of requiring people to make their claim for asylum so soon after arriving in the UK. If we genuinely want to provide refuge to highly traumatised people, Immigration officials must be sensitive when processing asylum claims and should receive training on how to recognise symptoms of stress. Otherwise, legitimate asylum seekers will continue to be punished by the application of policies designed to identify those who fabricate their stories.

Church Action on Poverty Post Card Campaign

During the Joseph Rowntree research into destitution among asylum seekers last autumn, stories came to light of the situation of many asylum seekers who are being held in detention centres in the UK. One Leeds teacher reported that two asylum seeker children attending his school were taken from their home, along with their parents, at three in the morning and removed to a detention centre, as the first steps by the government to have them deported. The children had been at the school for some time, had settled in and made friends. This action not only caused distress to the children but also to their friends. The school organised a collection of toys and books to be sent to the detention centre for the children, but the authorities there would not allow the children to receive the parcels.

An asylum seeker who had spent time in a detention centre spoke of the horrific way in which mothers with young children were being treated. Apart from at meal times, no drinking refreshments were available for children, some of them only several months old. Mothers were also told that nappies were rationed, which meant babies and toddlers having to wear soiled nappies.

There have also been reports of asylum seekers being beaten in the transport vans while being taken to and from the detention centres. This caused such an outrage that transport vans now have CCTV installed.

Life inside even the best run detention centres is one of despair; in the worst, conditions can only be described as 'Dickensian'. A damning reflection on the UK.

The Leeds Group of Church Action on Poverty is organising a post card campaign where people can send a postcard to those held in detention centres. As Amnesty International have proved, postcards not only offer hope and support for those held in unjust situations, but they also send a message of shame to the authorities.

If you would like to know more about the Post Card Campaign, please contact Shelagh Fawcett at Leeds Diocesan Justice and Peace Commission, Hinsley Hall, 62 Headingley Lane, Leeds, LS6 2BX; 0113 261 8055; or shelagh@leedsjp.org.uk

18 Months Befriending an Iraqi Refugee

LASSN introduced me to Mahmood in late 2005. He was a refugee from Iraq and had been assaulted earlier that year, here, when two men broke into his house and beat him so badly they fractured his skull. As a result of his injuries he was unable to work and suffered from severe depression. Mistakes by the Department of Work and Pensions (DWP) led them to cut off his incapacity benefit and with no income, he had run out of money to pay bills or buy food. His electricity was cut off and he was reduced to eating nothing but sugar for a week as that was all he had left. With no hope for the future he often spoke about suicide.

Having no training in social work or experience with refugees, it was a very intimidating situation to enter into. I didn't know whether or not I would really be able to help, and there were so many problems that I did not know how to begin resolving. With LASSN's support, however, I decided to just get involved and do what I could.

Over the 18 months I worked with Mahmood we made incredible progress. We got the council to replace his front door, which had been damaged during the burglary, and install window grilles to improve security. I represented him at an appeal hearing against the DWP and we won the case to have his incapacity benefit reinstated. We worked with a solicitor to successfully claim compensation for his injuries from the Criminal Injuries Compensation Authority. We fixed his computer and connected it to the Internet so that he could contact his friends and family. We also arranged repayment plans for rent and council tax arrears.

The progress we made helped Mahmood to feel more in control of his situation and he began to see that he could build a future. His depression became less acute and he became motivated to study for his driver's license and citizenship tests. I fundraised for driving lessons and tests, which Mahmood passed earlier this year. He then took the citizenship test and, despite language difficulties, passed on his first try. Our befriending relationship came to a close just as he found work.

At the beginning, due to negative experiences with service providers such as the Home Office and the DWP, Mahmood understandably saw me as another potential problem and mistrusted me. However, by the end of our 18 months together we had grown so close through the relationship that we came to call each other "brother".

Our relationship had a much wider effect than we anticipated as it broke down our preconceptions about each other's religions. We were able to tell

our respective Muslim and Christian friends about our experiences and foster understanding between the two faiths at a time of great conflict and misunderstanding.

If LASSN had not become involved then, I do not know whether Mahmood would still be alive today. Thanks to LASSN, befriending has not only helped Mahmood by giving him hope and a future, but has also helped me to change the way I think about the place of vulnerable people in our society. Befriending has had a wider social impact in promoting friendship and understanding, both between people of different faiths as well as between British people and refugees.

Allah Karim

English at Home Report

LASSN's English at Home Scheme has now been going for 6 years. I am always amazed at the quality of tutors who volunteer with us, not just professionally, but as people also. Although traditionally the summer months have been a quiet time for recruiting volunteers, in recent weeks we have interviewed and accepted a good number of new volunteer tutors.

To date we have 29 volunteers who are trained and being matched up with 30 referred students. The trend is towards more referrals that have leave to remain in the UK, of which there are 20, rather than asylum seekers. Recent referrals have been of wives with babies who have come to the UK under the family reunion scheme. Four more new volunteers have to be trained. Many come through our website and as result of talks given at the end of CELTA courses at Leeds Metropolitan University. As a result, the number of tutors has kept pace with the number of referrals.

Over the summer, I have carried out five reviews at three different levels: absolute beginner, elementary and intermediate, and measured the level of progress achieved over 6 months to 1 year. For example, the beginner who was illiterate in her own language and could not speak any English. After six months, she could answer all my simple questions without hesitation and was able to write simple words quite legibly. This demonstrates the high quality of volunteers that join the scheme.

On the other hand, there are the occasional disappointments when volunteers need to leave the scheme before the six months is up. This happens for various reasons: new job, moving away from Leeds, health reasons or even pregnancy. This always leaves a certain number of students in limbo until another tutor can be found or they can get onto a college course.

Gerard Godon

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This Newsletter
is funded by the
Allen Lane Foundation

