UK prison deemed guilty of "institutional neglect" in treatment of asylum-seekers

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Britain's chief inspector of prisons has described Rochester prison in Kent as "a disgrace". In an official report, Sir David Ramsbotham said the prison was guilty of "institutional neglect" and that some of its practices could well be illegal. The report attacked the facility's treatment of asylum-seekers and young offenders in particular.

Young offenders are housed in a building that served as Britain's first Borstal [juvenile offenders institute]. The area was filthy and vermin infested, the report stated. Seventy prisoners aged between 17 and 21 were "subjected to an impoverished regime in which the only constant was unpredictability". Inmates stated they found mice and cockroaches all around the wing. The staff room was said to have "reeked of dead vermin" and there was a "foul smell in the TV room". At mealtimes the young prisoners were forced to wash their plates in two buckets of water with nothing to dry them on.

Ramsbotham's report was drawn up after he made an unannounced visit to the prison. "Two cells on D wing were not in use because a detainee who, at different times had been housed in both cells, had deliberately cut himself. We found congealed blood on the floor of his cell and a bloodstained washbasin that remained unclean since the event that had taken place five weeks earlier.

"The second self-harm event took place four weeks later; the washbasin contained bloodstains and the walls and table in the cell had messages smeared on them in blood. Although we drew this to the attention of wing staff and the governor, nothing had been done about it by the end of our inspection, which in our view typified the absence of proper care in the management of detainees".

Just under half the prison's population is made up of refugees awaiting the outcome of their applications for asylum. Ramsbotham was critical that they were being held in prison at all, saying that such detainees should be held in special immigration centres. The majority of the asylum-seekers spoke no English and no translation facilities were at hand.

A spokesman for the National Association for the Care and Resettlement of Offenders (NACRO) said, "if people are fleeing from persecution and in many cases torture, then it can't be right for us to place them in prison-like conditions which are a constant reminder of the ill treatment they suffered in their own country."

At Rochester many detainees were required to sign documents they did not understand and were handed prison rulebooks written only in English. Publishing them in different languages was deemed to be too costly. The report also questioned the legality of forcing refugees to take mandatory drug tests and then punishing them when they refused.

After the report was published, a solicitor informed the *Guardian* newspaper that the prison's telephone system did not permit calls to be made directly to the asylum-seekers. He said, "when attempting to obtain a vital instruction from detainees in order to prepare a bail application, it is necessary to leave messages on the Rochester prison answer-phone. If these messages are passed on, and we cannot be certain that they are, the detainees can telephone us from the public pay phone inside the prison using a phone card. It is common to be cut off at crucial times in the conversation."

Such intolerable conditions have provoked much protest over the years. In January 1996 detainees staged a four-week hunger strike in protest at conditions. During another protest in 1997, detainees issued a statement calling attention to "what seems to be a

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deliberate inaction of the authorities to our continued unlawful imprisonment without trial in Rochester prison".

The detainees' statement continued, "Not only has our number risen, also the jail conditions are deteriorating daily. Coupled with a ‘Get Tough' prison regime designed to break us psychologically and emotionally, many of us are visibly cracking up after serving two years. We are trampled over by the iron fist of injustice and oppression. Several have attempted suicide, hunger strikes and peaceful protests."

Amnesty International has conducted numerous investigations into the incarceration of asylum-seekers. It regularly receives letters from detainees and quotes the following example, "I'm in such a hopeless situation that I wish I was never born. This prison, without hope and faith to survive is hell. Please help me!" The Algerian security forces had previously tortured the writer. He wrote his letter from Wormwood Scrubs prison in London.

The inhuman conditions in which many asylum applicants are held was brought home forcibly on Wednesday, January 26, when a 49-year-old Lithuanian detainee committed suicide in Harmondsworth Detention Centre near Heathrow Airport. Other detainees were treated for shock and two security guards went home suffering trauma.

Responsibility for such tragedies and prison conditions rests with the Labour government. Since coming to office in 1997, Home Secretary Jack Straw has introduced immigration controls even more draconian than his Conservative predecessors. He boasted of this in a recent article in the Sunday tabloid *News of the World.* Under the headline, "We'll slam door on fake immigrants", Straw enthused that "In 1998 nearly 30,000 were refused entry into the UK and sent home. Every large port or airport has a trained forgery team to identify people coming with fake documents. Last year they confiscated more than 5,000 passports."

Defending Labour's decision to replace cash payments to asylum-seekers with a restrictive voucher system, Straw claimed that "it is undeniable that access to social security cash benefits in Britain does act as an incentive for many seeking a better life." His decision to "speed up" asylum applications was to prevent detainees "string[ing] out their stay by exploiting the appeal system".

The government has carried out a major expansion of detention centres. It recently announced the use of former military barracks to accommodate those seeking asylum and a new centre in Feltham is intended to hold families.

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