

Britain: Fire at Yarl's Wood detention centre highlights plight of refugees

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Yarl's Wood detention centre that holds asylum and immigration detainees in Britain lies in ruins after a fire on February 14. Investigators have as yet been unable to make the building safe for inspection and up to 25 asylum seekers remain missing, possibly caught in the fire. The exact figure of those missing cannot be determined as records held in the reception area were destroyed.

In the immediate aftermath of the fire, press reports spoke of rioting and arson by some of those detained at the centre. The general picture painted in the press was that detainees had burned down the building in an elaborate escape plot, with 15 people who fled the centre having been rounded up by police.

It is too early to say exactly what happened at Yarl's Wood, but certain facts have come to light.

By all accounts, the fire started after a disturbance by detainees, which had been underway for several hours. The protest began after security staff at the centre attempted to remove an elderly sick detainee to hospital in handcuffs. The detainee had been ill for the previous three days and others felt she should have been taken to hospital immediately and that handcuffing her was an outrage. At one stage in the protest, an estimated 200 detainees climbed on to the roof of one of the buildings.

What is not yet established is how the fire started. Detainees are adamant that the fire broke out in the reception area, which they do not have access to.

Since the centre, Europe's largest, was opened on November 19, 2001, it has been the scene of continuing protests. On December 10, 2001, five Roma people began a hunger strike and since then not a day has passed without one or more detainees being on hunger strike. An Eastern European asylum seeker went without food for 34 days. On January 18 this year, the majority of detainees at the centre went on hunger

strike for 24 hours. One of the main complaints in this protest was also the handcuffing of detainees being transported to hospital.

Emma Ginn, from the Campaign to Stop Arbitrary Detentions at Yarl's Wood, said in a statement, "Since the camp opened there have been daily complaints about the delays in access to medical treatment and delays in moving people to hospital. There have also been complaints about limited association times, bad food, delay of incoming phone calls, the use of handcuffs when detainees are taken to court, the dentists or to hospital, unequal distribution of a weekly £2 telephone card to all detainees. Neither detainees or visitors are allowed pen and paper during visits and children's access to education is very poor."

The National Coalition of Anti-Deportation Campaigns (NCADC) said, "Arbitrary detention, dispersal, vouchers, deportations, self harm, suicides, racist attacks, snatch squads, are all part of the daily life of asylum seekers in the UK.

"The blame for what happened at Yarl's Wood lies squarely with the government. Their latest draconian proposals for asylum seekers, unveiled in 'Secure Borders, Save Haven', will lead to more incidents like these."

Yarl's Wood was created at a cost of £100 million as part of a network of removal centres able to hold up to 4,000 asylum and immigration detainees. Nine hundred of these were to be held at Yarl's Wood. At the time of the fire only 384 places were filled. Supposedly designed to hold those whose request for asylum had failed and who would otherwise abscond, Yarl's Wood contained many detainees whose cases had not yet been heard.

Shortly before Yarl's Wood opened, Home Secretary David Blunkett announced new legislation aimed at

speeding up deportations. After much criticism of the previous “dispersal policy”—where asylum seekers were dispatched to various towns and cities around the country, housed in sub-standard conditions and frequently the target of racist attacks—Blunkett presented the new laws as a “reform” of the system.

Alongside the proposal to set up induction, accommodation and removal centres, Blunkett announced the abolition of the hated system whereby refugees were given food vouchers instead of cash payments. The new centres were to replace the previous policy of accommodating asylum seekers in prisons, which had been condemned as a violation of their human rights. At the same time ID smart cards were to be introduced for all asylum seekers, containing the bearer’s photograph and fingerprints.

Far from being a progressive alternative, the legislation made the detention of asylum seekers routine. Keith Best of the Immigration Advisory Service (IAS) said he believed a major factor fuelling the disturbances at Yarl’s Wood was the government’s decision to step up the pace of deportations. “When you have a situation which is driven by ‘how many can we get rid of’, then you are going to get some stupid decisions,” he said. The IAS alone had successfully persuaded the court to release half a dozen people from Yarl’s Wood because they were wrongfully detained, he added.

The *Independent* newspaper quoted a former detainee at Yarl’s Wood who had been a member of the Movement for Democratic Change in Zimbabwe, the opposition party that has received support from Britain. “Little did I know I would be handcuffed and stripped naked before being transported to my first detention centre. I was treated like a criminal and shut in a dark room at Oakington.” The man said his wife and young son were sent directly to Scotland and given a flat while he remained imprisoned, first at Holme House near Middlesbrough then Yarl’s Wood. He said life at Yarl’s Wood was more comfortable, but still controlled. “It felt like living inside a submarine, totally trapped and shut out from the outside world.”

The Immigration Service and Home Office own Yarl’s Wood, but management of the centre has been given to security company Group 4 on a six-year contract. The company has been notorious for “serious operational failures” at all the centres and prisons it

runs. Worlds, Buckley Hall, Parc and Doncaster prisons and Campsfield House immigration detention centre have all suffered serious problems within three years of opening. Some were hit by riots and disciplinary problems, while others saw fires or a high level of suicides.

It has also come to light that the government ignored advice from the fire service to fit sprinkler systems at Yarl’s Wood. Acting Deputy Chief Fire Officer with Bedfordshire Fire and Rescue Service, Clive Walsh, said, “We were asked for our opinion at the end of 2000, early 2001 and it was our advice to have sprinklers in a building of this type.” Co-owner of sprinkler suppliers Actspeed, Ashley Gorton, told the *Guardian* that his firm had submitted a bid to fit a sprinkler system at a cost of £350,000 when the centre was being built in November 2000. “We had four meetings with the architect and other people, but it got to the point where we heard no more from them.” The total damage to Yarl’s Wood as a result of the fire is £35 million.

A Home Office spokeswoman has said sprinklers are not fitted in any of the new detention centres—Oakington, near Cambridge, Harmondsworth, near Heathrow Airport, and Dungavel in South Lanarkshire. Neither are they installed at older buildings converted to hold immigration detainees—Campsfield House at Kidlington near Oxford, Tinsley House, near Gatwick Airport, Lindholme, near Doncaster, and Haslar in Gosport.



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