Britain: Asylum-seekers detained under prison-like conditions

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The Blair government's asylum and immigration policies have led to the incarceration of entire families in a network of detention centres across the country. Hundreds of men, women and children are held in prison-like conditions, having been forcibly removed from the communities in which they had settled. Estimates suggest that over 50 children are held at any one time, usually for several months.

Asylum-seekers, classified as "failed" or "high-risk" by the Home Office, are sent to these centres for indefinite periods, usually prior to deportation. In most cases, claims for asylum are rejected because of minor technicalities such as the immigrant not having applied promptly enough upon entering the country.

Asylum-seekers pulled in by Immigration Service officials are often separated from their families and bundled off to detention centres with little explanation of what is happening to them. Handcuffed or in cages, people convicted of no crime are transported to and from these centres in high-security vehicles. Once at their place of detention, the asylum application process itself becomes far more difficult as the centres are often hundreds of miles from lawyers or support services.

The Labour government has faced particular criticism for holding entire families in these facilities, even those with young children. Families of up to five are made to share one room, while single men live in dormitories. There is little in the way of education and recreation, even for children removed from school. Tauhid Pasha, legal and policy director of the Joint Council on the Welfare of Immigrants, said, "We hear that children do not get enough play time, the level of education is inadequate, they do not get enough access to the outside world or the chance to interact with their peers. Detaining asylum-seekers is questionable but detaining children who have done no crime and whole families is unconscionable."

Home Secretary David Blunkett blandly described the detention of children as "regrettable." Blunkett cynically claimed that the current detention policy was driven by concern for child welfare: "Where it is necessary to detain individuals with children, we believe it is better that the children remain with their parents rather than split up the family."

Several detention centres have been established since the government introduced them in 2001. Often in remote areas of Britain, the centres are run in partnerships between the Home Office and private firms. Detainees have frequently resorted to hunger strikes and self-harm in attempts to highlight conditions in these places. In February of last year, a riot resulting in a large fire occurred at Yarl's Wood Detention Centre following complaints of the mistreatment of an elderly detainee. Yarl's Wood is one of the Immigration Service's centres operated by the Group 4 security company.

Another centre, a former youth prison in Scotland, has become the focus of repeated reports for the abysmal conditions in which detainees are kept. Dungavel Detention Centre, owned and operated by Premier Prisons, has been accused of maintaining a prison-style regime for its detainees, with especially bad conditions for the children.

Driving up to Dungavel, even in fine summer weather, one is struck by the forbidding character of the building and its surroundings. Encircled by a high razor-wire-topped fence, Dungavel is perched on isolated moorland, several miles from the nearest village. The view from the bottom of the access road is one of wilderness. What asylum-seekers facing deportation, perhaps to death and certainly to great stress, make of the place can be imagined. In winter, the place must be

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utterly miserable.

Dungavel can hold up to 148 detainees, including up to 62 people in its family unit. As well as locked internal and external doors isolating detainees from each other, visitors, including legal representatives, are only given restricted access to those inside. Reports suggest that visitors have been wrongly told that detainees are attending immigration hearings, when in fact they have been available for visits at the centre.

In April, 60 detainees carried out a hunger strike to protest over the length of time immigration officials were taking to resolve their cases.

A prisons inspectorate report into conditions at Dungavel has allegedly had its release blocked by the Home Office. The inspectors visited the centre in October 2002 and were due to issue their findings shortly after. Previous reports on detention centres in England have highlighted the lack of constructive activities, legal support and contact with the outside world. The report is likely to include findings from the Scottish Schools inspectorate, also believed to be highly critical.

Premier, the UK subsidiary of the notorious Wackenhut Corrections Corporation also runs health and education facilities at the centre. Wackenhut, which runs prisons in the United States, Australia and South Africa, recorded a record turnover of $568.6 million in 2002.

A recent report by a visiting group of Scottish parliamentarians stated that the provision of education for children was "limited." Health provision was also criticised for failing to provide information on hospital times and treatment in the language of the patient. A 21,000-name petition calling for the closure of Dungavel and the humane treatment of families seeking asylum was handed in to the Home Office in June.

The situation of one family at Dungavel has been the focus of much public attention. Yurdugal Ay, a Kurd originally from Turkey, and her young family of four children have been held for more than a year. The family had been settled in Kent in southern England where the children were attending local schools before being removed to Dungavel. The family's father, also Kurdish, was extradited to Germany, where the family was initially refused asylum. From there, he was sent back to Istanbul. The Ay family has not heard from him since.

The entire family faces deportation to Turkey. Their legal representatives had tried to take their case to the House of Lords, Britain's highest court, following a series of judgments against them. However, their application for legal aid to pay for legal costs has been rejected. Additionally, the refusal to grant legal aid ends the family's protection from automatic deportation by the Home Office.

Human rights activists and religious figures have condemned the treatment of the Ay family, and have repeatedly called on the Home Secretary to exercise some compassion for the family. Commenting on the case, Blunkett warned that letting the Ay family or other similar cases stay in Britain would have an "appalling" effect on immigration controls. A Home Office spokeswoman tried to pin the blame onto the family, saying, "We are sympathetic to the needs of children. However, the parents' actions are the cause of the children's turmoil."

The eldest of the four children, 14 year-old Beriwan, spoke to the *Independent on Sunday* newspaper about conditions inside the centre one year after their removal there. "We have all suffered so much already. My brother and sisters have suffered a lot in here, their mental health has suffered. My sister Newroz doesn't talk or eat and every day gets thinner. Her hair is falling out. The family unit should be closed down because children suffer here. It's not a good place. Children need freedom. They haven't done anything and don't understand why they are in here."

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