Britain: Notorious Yarl's Wood asylum detention centre reopens

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25 September 2003

One of Britain's most notorious detention centres for asylum seekers is open to accept new detainees, 18 months after it was closed due to a major fire on February 14, 2002. Two detainees allegedly involved in rioting on the night of the fire at Yarl's Wood detention centre in Bedfordshire have been found guilty of violent disorder following a four-month trial.

Both men—Albanian Beher Limani, 26, and Nigerian Henry Momodou, 39—were sentenced to four years imprisonment. Two other men had earlier pleaded guilty and received shorter sentences. Three others were cleared of the same charge but face imminent deportation.

During the trial, the prosecution had presented evidence suggesting that the defendants had manufactured a full-scale riot in order to escape and cause as much damage to property as possible. For several months before the trial, much of the media had given sensationalist accounts of asylum seekers on the rampage in Yarl's Wood on the night of the fire.

Speaking ahead of his conviction, Henry Momodou told the BBC's *Today* programme that the account of events given by the prosecution was false.

Momodou said he and others had been singled out for punishment because they had spoken up for their rights. He had complained about conditions in a segregation area where he and other detainees were kept after the fire. He told the programme, "The segregation unit was more or less like a police cell with iron gates and a corrugated iron bed. I had to sleep on that three or four days. It was terrible, you don't know what's going to happen to you, it is like being on Death Row... They chose a few of us because we spoke for the detainees."

Momodou attempted to counter the depiction of detainees running riot on the night of the fire. He said, "Some detainees did rescue some Group 4 officers, some detainees rescued some other detainees who were caught up in the fire inside the building. Some even sustained injuries from doing that."

He insists that he was in his room when the disturbance broke out and that he took no part in disorderly behaviour.

One police officer who had been present during the disturbance is reported to have described the event that sparked the fire as no more akin to a riot than an average Saturday night brawl in one of Britain's town centres.

Judge Sanders had issued a reporting ban towards the end of the case. Following an appeal by several newspapers, it was overturned, revealing that the lawyers for the defence had argued that their clients could not receive a fair trial. The defence had criticised the police and the Home Office for not allowing the defendants to build a proper case. Police had failed to take witness statements from people detained at Yarl's Wood at the time, meaning that, as the Home Office was deporting detainees with no regard as to whether or not they were possible witnesses, the defence could not call people who could have given evidence supporting the accused.

Further, the prosecution did not provide the defence with names and photographs of potential witnesses until one year after the disturbance, by which time many were either deported or "lost" within the asylum system.

Defence barristers also attacked the prison security service Group 4 for coaching witnesses and organising group counselling sessions, which risked contaminating evidence.

In a final blow to the chances of a fair trial, it was revealed that two of the jurors were openly hostile to asylum seekers. Shortly after the jury retired, one of its members informed the judge that a fellow juror had expressed the view that asylum seekers only came to Britain to receive state benefits, while another juror had said asylum seekers came to take jobs that ought to be for British people. The judge rejected the complaint.

Completed in November 2001, Yarl's Wood was Europe's biggest detention centre, capable of holding up to 900 people, including children. The centre is situated on Ministry of Defence land and cited as a "prohibited place" under the Official Secrets Act, ensuring that it is isolated from its surrounding area. Like most other detention centres, individuals who have committed no crime are held there far from the communities in which they had formerly resided in

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and far from support services.

Built to the specifications of a category B prison, the centre was monitored by hundreds of CCTV cameras, and surrounded by a five-metre-high perimeter fence topped with razor wire. When opened, Yarl's Wood was hailed by the government as an example of its commitment to "removals and the use of dedicated detention facilities for immigration offenders or failed asylum seekers."

At the time of the fire, the centre held around 300 asylum seekers, and in its short lifetime had been the scene of almost constant hunger strikes and protests by the detainees.

By most accounts, the fire at Yarl's Wood started following a minor disturbance by a small number of detainees. The fire spread out of control destroying buildings that were not fitted with sprinkler systems.

A Channel 4 television investigation into the incident has revealed that Group 4, on behalf of the Blair government, was running little short of a death trap. According to the investigation, Group 4 "regularly compromised" training and safety programmes at the detention centre.

One member of staff, detention custody officer Parvinder Ram, told Channel 4, "The training given by G4 [Group 4] was inadequate in my view to deal with the type of detainee accommodation at Yarl's Wood. I have never been involved in any type of fire drill or mock evacuation of the wings. When I asked one of my managers for guidance I was told we would 'play it by ear.' G4's attitude to these safety issues caused me grave concern."

With staff at the centre unable to cope with the situation, Home Office officials had to call in the prison service's specialist Typhoon riot control units to subdue the panicked detainees. This was later presented in the media as indicative of the scale of the disturbance.

One detainee told interviewers that when the fire broke out, "Group 4 officers all scattered and ran away. I think if they'd been trained for this sort of thing they'd forgotten it and decided to save their own skins. There was no way out and we thought—we're all going to die here."

Speaking about the construction of the £80 million complex, Jeff Goddard, former acting chief fire officer for Bedfordshire, said that corners were cut on basic safety standards. "They [Group 4 and the government] wanted to get it built quickly. They had built one in Cambridgeshire without sprinklers but it was a different location and they felt confident there was no need for sprinklers and there was no budging them."

Channel 4 found further ways in which safety was compromised. A memo sent to the manager of Yarl's Wood—David Watson—shortly before the incident outlined the results of a recent fire alarm check. The memo read: "David, I'm afraid what is contained provides for some pretty grim reading. Not only does the alarm not work in every area but in some cases the fire stop doors did not operate during testing."

Former detective chief superintendent David Tomlinson of Bedfordshire police commented on the evidence of shoddy fire safety clearly visible after the blaze:

"When you walk round a major fire the first thing that you notice on the outside is that all the fire doors are open. There were fire doors clearly still shut. Considering the number of people in the premises I was anticipating all doors would be open and people would have access to them. They weren't."

It is clear that only good fortune prevented loss of life on the night of the fire. Nevertheless, hundreds of detainees and staff suffered enormous risks and trauma due directly to the asylum policies of the government and the profit-driven actions of Group 4. Many Group 4 staff at the centre plan to sue the company for mental health difficulties resulting from the events of that night.

The GMB union, which represents staff at Yarl's Wood, claims it had advised Group 4 before the riot that more staff were required to maintain security. In the run-up to the reopening of Yarl's Wood, the GMB has been in talks with Group 4 on how to best maintain security at the centre. The union has offered no criticism of Labour's immigration policies.

Now operating at 50 percent of its original capacity, the worst damaged parts of Yarl's Wood have been demolished, leaving the remaining areas next to what looks like a building site. The Home Office is preparing to send 60 single women to the centre, which continues to be run by Group 4. A Home Office official said that the centre's population would increase to over 400 by 2005.

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