

Harmondsworth Detention Centre

Britain: Report documents brutality against asylum-seekers

Niall Green
11 October 2003

A report issued by the chief inspector of prisons in England and Wales into conditions at the Harmondsworth Detention Centre in 2002 has called for a police investigation into reports of detainees being beaten by staff. Several detainees are alleged to have been assaulted during transfers in and out of the centre, often as they are sent for deportation. On several occasions during detainee transfers, prison service Tactical Intervention Squads—armed with riot gear—have been called in to assist the private security guards that man the centre.

The author of the report, Anne Owers, met one asylum-seeker who had required hospitalisation for injuries sustained during an attempt to deport him and others who had suffered serious assaults at the hands of guards. She acknowledged that allegations by detainees of assault were “common” but that few were referred to the police.

“It is extremely important,” Owers said, “that such claims should be fully investigated and, if necessary, prosecuted, but we are told that police and prosecutors were reluctant to act. If so, this is unacceptable.”

Of the nine assaults against detainees reported to the police in the past year all were dismissed as unsubstantiated.

The report also criticises the centre as being an “essentially unsafe place for detainees and staff.” There were “increasing levels of disorder” in the facility and a detainee-on-detainee assault rate of approximately seven attacks per week. There is an average of one self-harm incident a week officially recorded by the centre, a figure likely to be far higher in reality. Despite this the inspectorate found that “suicide, self-harm and anti-bullying procedures were not efficiently managed.”

There was also found to be insufficient mental health support for detainees held in the centre’s medical unit.

Owers claimed that Harmondsworth was “frightening and potentially dangerous” and “not well equipped to ensure detainees’ protection.” Levels of desperation among detainees at the centre are understandably high, with many having been resident in one or more detention centre for months. Harmondsworth is situated next to London’s Heathrow Airport and serves as the last port of call for thousands of asylum-seekers before their forced removal from Britain.

The report criticised staff shortages and poor health and safety protection. It pointed out that a number of small fires at the centre had “severely tested the fire response capability” there. Like the Yarl’s Wood Detention Centre that was ravaged by fire in 2002, Harmondsworth is not fitted with a sprinkler system. During the blaze at Yarl’s Wood staff were unable to cope, leaving the panicked detainees to their own fate. Conditions in Harmondsworth are directly comparable to those that existed in Yarl’s Wood prior to its near destruction—an event that could have claimed the lives of scores of detainees and staff.

Harmondsworth has a family unit capable of holding dozens of families with children. There were 25 children held at the centre at the time of the inspection. Owers found that the educational, recreational and developmental requirements of young people at the centre were being inadequately provided for. Furthermore, the lack of personal security for detainees and the presence of many traumatised adult asylum-seekers created an environment wholly unsuitable for children. “Given the inherent insecurity of the centre as a whole, we remain of the view that, as in other centres

in England, children should only exceptionally be detained in Harmondsworth, and not for any period longer than seven days,” the report stated.

The children of asylum-seekers, whether at a single centre or cumulatively by being moved from one centre to another, often spend large portions of their childhood in these grim and dangerous facilities prior to being deported.

The report comments that many of the problems at Harmondsworth are common to all the asylum centres: “Many of the systematic problems that detainees experienced at Harmondsworth have already been covered in the Inspectorate’s six previous reports.”

These include: “the inability of the Immigration Service to progress cases efficiently or communicate effectively with detainees; the absence of sufficient competent legal advice and representation; the need for independent welfare advice to assist detainees to deal with practical problems during detention and on removal; and the need for more activities for detainees, including the ability to work.”

It is not the first official report to criticise Burns International, the private security firm contracted by the Home Office to run Harmondsworth until earlier this year. In April this year a Home Office report—only published following pressure from the human rights group Liberty—on an investigation into the suicide in 2000 of Lithuanian asylum-seeker Robertus Grabys exposed some of the conditions facing vulnerable asylum-seekers in Harmondsworth. The Home Office concluded that there had been insufficient care for Mr. Grabys who was known to be suffering from severe depression. Found hanging in his cell on the day he was to be deported, he had been dead for over an hour. Burns International had not placed him on a suicide watch, and the centre was found to have no formal policy to prevent suicides.

In February Burns International—a division of the Swedish-based multinational security company Securitas—was outbid for the Harmondsworth contract by Premier Detention Services Ltd., which currently runs the much criticised regime at the Dungavel asylum centre in Scotland.

From 2001 Harmondsworth held up to 550 detainees. In 2002 a further 550-bed unit was added to the complex making it the largest immigration detention centre in the country. The centre processes around

12,000 people a year, none of whom are sent there for committing a criminal offence. Rather, men, women and children are held in prison-like conditions to facilitate the Blair Labour government’s intimidating policy of rounding up asylum-seekers in order to deter them from seeking refuge in Britain. The government is currently attempting to arbitrarily halve the number of people claiming asylum.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact