

Britain: anti-asylum measures lead to suicides and self-harm

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Recent suicides at two of Britain's immigration removal centres have underlined the tragic human cost of the Labour government's anti-asylum-seeker policies.

On July 19, a 31-year-old man originally from the Ukraine was found hanged in his cell in Harmondsworth immigration removal centre, near Heathrow Airport. The man's suicide triggered a disturbance amongst detainees, many of who had been held in Home Office facilities for months and even years. More than 100 of Harmondsworth's detainees were relocated to another of Britain's 10 detention centres.

One of them, a 23-year-old Vietnamese man named Tung Wang, committed suicide shortly after being moved to Dungavel, a removal centre in a remote part of southern Scotland. He was due to be deported to Germany before being sent back to Vietnam.

A few weeks before Wang's suicide, Home Secretary David Blunkett had visited Dungavel and declared conditions and facilities there "entirely satisfactory." He added that its "caring and dedicated" staff impressed him.

In August, a 27-year-old Nigerian man, John Oguchuckwu, was moved from Dungavel to a nearby prison after he spoke out about the conditions at the centre that contributed to Wang's death. Oguchuckwu's lawyers pointed out that it was only a few days after their client rang refugee support groups to let them know about the Vietnamese man's death that the immigration authorities removed him to Greenock prison. Officials claimed that Oguchuckwu had become violent and a security risk within Dungavel.

Oguchucku's lawyers insist that their client, who had twice attempted suicide during his detention at

Harmondsworth, should not have been sent to Greenock Prison. They claim that Wang's suicide caused Oguchuckwu to spiral into depression and consider taking his own life. A few days after the suicide of the Vietnamese man, Oguchucku became agitated and anxious.

Lawyer Jelina Rahman said her client has a history of self-harm. In Nigeria, Oguchuckwu's mother, father and sister were killed in sectarian violence between Christians and Muslims.

Despite claims by the Scottish Prison Service (SPS) that detainees of asylum detention centres are only relocated to prison if there is evidence of violent behaviour or if the detainee is deemed a security risk, there is clear evidence that Oguchucku was moved so as to avoid the potential embarrassment of another suicide at Dungavel. The BBC reported on August 20 that it had seen a leaked SPS psychiatric report on Oguchucku confirming that "he was transferred from Dungavel because there were concerns with regard to deliberate self-harm."

Ms. Rahman said Oguchucku, who was a priest, suffered because the Dungavel authorities feared that his case was harming the centre's reputation. She said the psychiatric report contradicted the government's version of events, adding, "There is no mention in the psychiatric report of any violence. If he was violent, then why did the psychiatrist write a different story in his report? This is a potentially suicidal man who has been in jail for a month with criminals."

In an interview with the *Sunday Herald* from Greenock prison, Oguchucku recounted his transfer. "I was told that I was moved because I was suicidal. I wasn't threatening or violent to any officers or other inmates. The Home Office is lying if it says that about me.

“At the time I was just so down that I actually was passing out. I was feeling very low. I was clinically depressed. At one point I didn’t eat for two weeks. I was moved to Greenock three weeks ago. When they moved me I was beginning to get better.”

“An officer in Greenock prison told me they’d taken me here because Dungavel couldn’t do proper suicide watches.”

Oguchuckwu claimed he was not put on suicide watch when he was transferred to Greenock and was made to share a cell and mix with criminals.

Rahman said she is launching a civil claim on behalf of Oguchuckwu, following a severe assault meted out to him by immigration guards in January at Heathrow airport.

Another Dungavel detainee at the time of Tung Wang’s suicide was also removed to a prison after speaking out. Sarah Richards, from South Africa, was transferred to Cornton Vale prison in August after speaking to the press about the suicide of Wang.

Positive Action in Housing (PAIH), a Glasgow-based anti-racist charity, found that “Dungavel Removal Centre cannot cope with the suicide culture it has created, particularly amongst long-term detainees. There is a definite pattern emerging of asylum seekers being held for long, indefinite periods up to two years, and then being transferred to prison when their spirits break.”

The group is calling on Amnesty International and the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees to investigate their allegations. Robina Qureshi of PAIH said, “This suicide [of Tung Wang] is part and parcel of the Dungavel culture: a culture of fear, suicide attempts, self-harm and psychological depression, alongside the prison regime and a pretend veneer that ‘everything is fine.’ ”

Other examples of the traumas suffered in the asylum detention system include:

* In 2002, refugee campaigners demanded an inquiry after a Nigerian asylum seeker held at Dungavel attempted to commit suicide by driving a seven-inch iron rod into his stomach.

* Russian asylum seeker Andre Aliev, detained for almost 19 months since January 2003 at Dungavel, was taken to Greenock Prison in August. He had become badly depressed and sewed up his lips and went on hunger strike in protest at his indefinite detention.

* Vassel Gabbes, a Palestinian man held at Greenock Prison, joined with Andre Aliev’s hunger strike in protest at his own lengthy detention. He was moved in September to a new removal centre in Middlesex.



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