

Britain: Asylum seekers protest treatment at detention centres

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Asylum seekers, refugees and undocumented workers seeking to remain in Britain last week staged a protest in response to their treatment at Harmondsworth detention centre near Heathrow, London.

Riot police and dog handlers were brought in to quell disturbances, which spread to four wings of the centre. Detainees lit fires to draw attention to their plight and at one stage spelled out the message “SOS Freedom” in the courtyard, using sheets from their dormitories. Although the centre was wrecked, no injuries to staff or detainees have been reported. Some 150 low-risk detainees have been released from other centres so that the inmates at Harmondsworth can be moved there.

One detainee, Diyako Rasul, an Iraqi asylum seeker, was put in detention seven months ago and is awaiting deportation after his asylum application was turned down. Rasul fled to the UK from Iraq in September 2003 after refusing to join an Islamic extremist group, of which his father is a member.

Rasul said people are regularly sworn at and verbally abused. “It’s terrible, there is nothing to do,” he said.

Rasul’s girlfriend, Joanne Bean, said she is worried about him as he has tried to harm himself, adding, “I think the way we are treating these people is disgraceful. Many have fled oppression in their homeland and this is the welcome they get.”

The Labour government and immigration agencies immediately sought to blame the migrants for the trouble. Lin Holmer, director general of the Immigration and Nationality Directorate, said that the disturbances had been a “deliberate attempt” to prevent the deportation of foreign nationals.

Home Secretary John Reid said the unrest was an “attempt to sabotage” the UK’s immigration policy, stating, “The perpetrators have been prepared to destroy property and to endanger their fellow detainees . . . They have, themselves, harmed their own environment. We will

not allow them to succeed in frustrating the enforcement of the law.”

It is clear that the riot was not an attempt by undocumented workers to “harm their own environment,” but a response to the desperate conditions they face. A report in February this year published in the *British Medical Journal* by Mina Fazel, an Oxford academic, and her co-author Derrick Silove backed up this view.

It reported that doctors visiting the detention centres have noted that detainees, particularly those held for long periods, “suffer from profound hopelessness, despair, and suicidal urges.” They add that “doctors face complex ethical challenges in balancing the responsibility to provide care without discrimination to a vulnerable group against the risk of becoming complicit in a system that by its very nature causes psychological harm. Questions remain whether it is possible to offer effective psychiatric treatment in a setting—prolonged detention—that is the root cause of the mental disturbance. Doctors also face the ethical dilemma of how to respond to requests by authorities to certify asylum seekers as fit to be detained or to be forcibly removed.”

Reid’s comments came as the Labour government stepped up its right-wing “law and order” agenda, the dire consequences of which were recently exposed in a report on Harmondsworth by the chief inspector of prisons, Anne Owers. A news item on the report’s publication was cited as the catalyst for the riot—detainees at Harmondsworth interested in watching this item were prevented from doing so by a prison warden, who turned off the centre’s TV.

Owers heavily criticised Harmondsworth, saying, “We attributed these poor relations, which were worse than any we have seen elsewhere, at least in part to the centre management’s overemphasis on physical security and control. Many of the rules and system would have been over-controlling in a prison, let alone a removal centre.”

She continued, “It had been allowed to slip into a culture and approach which was wholly at odds with its stated purpose, and inimical to the proper care and treatment of detainees.”

The Owers report also criticised the operator of the facility, Kalyx, formerly UK Detention Services, a prison builder and property management company that is contracted until 2008, saying it was not meeting government standards.

Harmondsworth was built to hold up to 550 detainees, but in 2002 a further 550-bed unit was added to the complex, making it the largest immigration detention centre in the country. In 2005, 50 Zimbabwean detainees went on hunger strike hoping judges would re-examine their cases.

The detention centre processes around 2,000 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 government’s policy of rounding up asylum-seekers in order to deter them from seeking refuge in Britain.

More than 60 percent of inmates told government inspectors that they felt unsafe during an unannounced visit in July 2006, and more than 40 percent said staff had bullied them. Since 1989, six people have killed themselves at the centre.

In October 1989, Siho Iyugiven, aged 27, burnt to death after barricading himself in his cell.

In June 1990, Kimpua Nsimba (24) was found hanged.

Robertas Grabys (49) was found hanged in January 2000, and Olga Blaskevica (29) was murdered by her mentally ill partner in May 2003 while awaiting deportation.

In July 2004, Sergey Barnuyck (31) was found hanged, and following disturbances after his death Tran Quang Tung (35), who had been transferred to Dungavel removal centre, was also found dead.

The last death was that of Bereket Yohannes (26), who was found hanged in January 2006.

Owers’s report highlighted that a plan to prevent further suicides “was purely a bureaucratic exercise which had no impact on the centre’s practices,” and that staff had only limited access to ligature cutters, which can prevent detainees from hanging themselves.

Detainees’ movements at Harmondsworth were strictly controlled and anyone caught being “poorly behaved” was punished by removal from association with other detainees—an occurrence that has happened 440 times this year. Many also faced strip searches and were confined to

a single room—a practice that was used 129 times in the first six months of this year.

Anna Reisenberger, acting chief executive of the Refugee Council, said, “We are shocked to read this damning report about Harmondsworth, particularly as we, along with many other bodies, have been telling the Home Office for some time that it is the worst of the detention centres.”

Although Owers report was confined to an inspection of Harmondsworth, another recent report, “Driven to Desperate Measures,” published by the Institute of Race Relations, suggests that the terrible conditions at the centre are just the tip of the iceberg. It says 221 asylum seekers, refugees and undocumented workers in the UK have died in the past 15 years, and lists a catalogue of suicides and racist attacks in other institutions that have increased dramatically in the past five years. A major factor in these worsening conditions has been the Labour government’s immigration legislation, which has become increasingly barbaric.

The report cites Home Office figures for self-harm and suicide in detention centres for the ten months up to the end of January 2006. It states that 185 people had attempted self-harm, requiring medical treatment (how many were attempted suicides isn’t known), and 1,467 were put on self-harm watch.

Research by Medical Justice suggests the numbers could be higher, saying that 33 of 56 “failed” asylum seekers in four detention centres the group examined showed evidence of post-traumatic stress disorder or depression. Many had harmed themselves or made suicide attempts, and nearly half said they had been tortured.



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