

Conditions worsen at UK asylum-seeker detention centres

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Britain's Immigration Removal Centres have become notorious due to the desperate conditions facing immigrants and asylum-seekers detained there.

Despite a number of media exposés of the inhumane conditions facing those held at centres such as Harmondsworth, Yarl's Wood and Dungavel, including an undercover film aired on the BBC showing detainees often being violently harassed and abused, the situation has worsened considerably.

The intolerable conditions have led to a marked increase in the numbers engaging in self-harm. A recent survey by the National Coalition of Anti Deportation Campaigns revealed that between April 2006 and March 2007 there were 199 attempts to self-harm that required medical treatment. Incidents of this nature were happening every other day, according to findings.

A May 20 article in the *Guardian* documented some of the latest claims of abuse by those being held at Yarl's Wood and Harmondsworth.

Yarl's Wood in Bedfordshire is the largest "removal centre" in the UK. At the time it opened in 2001, it was Europe's biggest detention centre, capable of holding up to 900 people, including children. According to anti-detention centre campaigners, "Self-harm is particularly acute at Yarl's Wood, which reopened in September 2003 after half of it was gutted by fire during rioting in February 2002. It now houses hundreds of women, many of whom have attempted to claim asylum in Britain after fleeing war zones."

The *Guardian* said numerous incidents of abuse had been reported: "Assaults are said to be commonplace. One woman was stripped and thrown naked into a van taking her to the airport for deportation only for the pilot to refuse to allow her to fly as she had no clothes.

"The women also allege staff regularly refer to them as 'black monkey,' 'nigger' and 'bitch.' They claim vital faxes from solicitors are going missing and information on basic legal rights is being withheld. Detainees also complain they are given days-old reheated food in which they have

found hair, dirt and maggots."

Between November 26 and November 28, detainees rioted at the Harmondsworth Immigration Removal Centre in West Drayton, after they were banned from watching a damning news report on conditions there. While the ban was the immediate spark that led to the rioting, it was the climax of months of the most brutal treatment being meted out to the hundreds of vulnerable men, women and children being held being at the centre.

Just days prior to the riots, the Chief Inspector of Prisons published a damning report likening the regime at Harmondsworth to that of a "high security prison."

As a result of the November events, this week the civil and human rights organisation Liberty has written to Home Secretary John Reid to demand a public inquiry into the matter. The organisation issued a press release on May 21 stating, "It is clear that abuses at Harmondsworth detention centre sparked the disorder in November, abuses which escalated during the disturbance itself. These men deserve a public inquiry into the ill-treatment they faced; anything less could result in legal action."

It added, "Hunger strikes, destructive behaviour and self-harm are now endemic in Britain's biggest detention centres as detainees become increasingly desperate about living in what they claim are deteriorating conditions."

The release concluded that the "November disturbance at Harmondsworth was the second such incident in less than [two and a half] years. At Yarl's Wood in Bedfordshire, more than 100 women are refusing to eat, and there have been recent reports of major disturbances at Lindholme, South Yorkshire, and at Colnbrook in Middlesex."

The hunger strike by 100 women at Yarl's Wood began earlier this month following a threat by SERCO (the private company that runs the centre) to introduce a series of further crackdowns, eroding the rights of detainees even further. These include locking women up their rooms from 7 p.m. to 7 a.m., confiscating mobile phones and cutting the Sky News TV feed. In response, up to 200 women took part in protests at various wings in the camp. Many chanted slogans

in the corridors such as, “We won’t be locked up” and “Hands off our mobiles.” Others made banners from bedsheets reading, “We want freedom,” “We demand Human Rights” and “We want justice.”

Following this, all the women on DOVE wing began the hunger strike. They have a total of 15 demands, including release from detention, respect for privacy and the end to male guards entering cells without warning, an end to violence from staff, the dismissal of sexist and racist staff, an investigation into money sent by relatives and supporters that has disappeared, a reinstatement of the 71 pence daily allowance, no fingerprinting of visitors, adequate healthcare, and edible food.

In 2005, more than 30 Ugandan women detainees staged a hunger strike to demand to have their asylum claims reconsidered and to protest conditions at Yarl’s Wood.

Liberty’s letter to the home secretary calling for a public inquiry into the mistreatment of asylum-seekers at Harmondsworth states that it believes the regime there is in violation of the European Convention on Human rights, Article 3, which states, “No one shall be subjected to torture or to inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment.”

Citing a number of legal cases over the last 10 years in different European countries, the letter continues, “It is well established that the obligations imposed on the State by Article 2 (right to life) and Article 3 ECHR to refrain from taking life or inflicting inhuman or degrading treatment (the ‘negative obligation’) also requires the State to conduct an effective investigation into allegations of breaches of these Articles. Without such an obligation, the protection offered by Article 2 & 3 would be worthless.”

The letter addressed the fact that “the existence of an arguable breach of Article 3 by agents of the state mean that you are not only morally but also legally obliged to carry out a public inquiry.”

Liberty warns that if the home secretary refuses this, it will seek a judicial review of his decision on behalf of seven detainees it is representing, which would place Britain’s immigration system under scrutiny in the courts.

The communication has a number of additional documents, including a selection of harrowing excerpts from statements it has gathered from detainees at Harmondsworth since the events of 2005. Citing many examples of “general inhuman and degrading treatment at Harmondsworth,” the statements reveal the daily misery and suffering being doled out to those incarcerated there.

The witness statements document is available at the Liberty web site.

The report’s key points include the following:

- * “Officers were frequently abusive to the detainees and humiliated them intentionally. They would use racist slurs

and beat detainees without provocation.”

- * No effective complaints procedure exists at Harmondsworth.

- * The graphic picture emerging from the evidence provided in witness statements is a regime based on the systematic brutalisation of those being held, many of whom are in the most vulnerable state physically and mentally.

- * Punishments were given arbitrarily, including sending detainees to solitary confinement for responding to verbal abuse.

- * Detainees were denied access to correspondence, including that of their solicitors.

- * Guards at Harmondsworth did not provide detainees with the necessary items to maintain hygiene, and conditions were made unnecessarily difficult.

The report also addressed the high level of mistreatment following the rioting of last November and states that “Detainees were forced to go without food and water, some for over 40 hours.” They were also kept in their cells for more than 24 hours.

The document also cites witness statements that detainees were kept locked in their cells despite many of them being flooded. Some of the cells were also in total darkness, and witnesses claimed they could smell gas in many areas. Loose electrical cables made this situation even more dangerous.

The statement reports that under these appalling conditions, “Detainees were forced to urinate on the floor of their cells and this mixed with the water which was flowing round the room and got inside their shoes.”

The statement records that despite detainees protesting this situation, “guards were verbally abusive to the detainees and refused them permission to use the toilets on the landing.”

The Liberty letter to the home secretary also demands that witnesses have the right to be able to give evidence. Therefore, “since a significant portion of that evidence must be provided by individuals who were detained at Harmondsworth prior to and at the time of the disturbance, it is imperative that those individuals are not removed from the country against their will before they are given an opportunity to speak to the inquiry.”



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