

British government implicated in abuse of refugees and asylum seekers

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The British government has been implicated in the abuse of refugees and asylum seekers, according to a report published this month by a group of human rights campaigners and medical legal experts.

The report, *Outsourcing Abuse: the use and misuse of state-sanctioned force during the detention and removal of asylum seekers*, contains a detailed dossier outlining cases of systematic physical and verbal abuse against refugees and immigrants who face deportation to their country of origin. Most of the alleged assaults took place at the hands of security guards during transit between detention centres, during deportations to airports, or removal from places of residence.

Outsourcing Abuse was a response to a demand by the Home Office to corroborate an earlier dossier, which hit the headlines after the *Independent* published details in October 2007. Home Office ministers and officials dismissed the claims of abuse as unfounded, saying that many of the alleged victims had not come forward with further information to prove their mistreatment.

The new report contains nearly 300 cases of alleged assault, which took place between January 2004 and June 2008, and draws on a wide range of sources including solicitors, journalists, airline passengers, hospital staff and doctors. Many refugees and asylum seekers were also prepared to recount their ordeals, despite fears of retribution from the Home Office or the private security companies it employs to detain and deport them.

The report states that “Many additional allegations of assault have been reported to us that we simply have not had the resources to consider and therefore have not been included in the dossier. Because of this, coupled with the fact that other victims are fearful of coming forward, we feel our dossier is just the tip of the

iceberg.”

Outsourcing Abuse paints a picture where appalling physical and verbal abuse is condoned and accepted, if not actively encouraged. People are routinely kicked and punched, or otherwise injured by excessive use of force, and many are subjected to racist verbal abuse.

Some victims allege they were given injections to sedate them or forced to take pills. Others tell how they were denied access to emergency hospital facilities after sustaining injuries.

Typical of the 48 case studies contained in the dossier are:

* A 19-year-old Congolese man who claims that in 2007 he was thrown to the ground and kicked in the face, whilst being transferred to a segregation unit. An independent doctor advised care for head injury and noted abrasions to the forehead, bruising and swelling around the face.

* A Malawian man in the same year who alleges that he was pinned to the floor by Detention Custody Officers (DCOs) and “kicked all over his body, including his head”, at Dungavel detention centre.

* A Sudanese woman whose escorts repeatedly jabbed her in the eye and assaulted her after the pilot refused to fly.

* An Armenian man was left with a punctured lung after escorts stamped on him in the back of a van and then left in an immigration holding bay without medical support for hours.

* A Cameroonian man who claims he was detained without sufficient food or water and denied medication for treatment of hepatitis C. When, because of his illness, he refused to co-operate with efforts to move him on board a Kenya Airways flight for deportation he said, “They started beating me, kicking me all over. They put me on the floor and continued to kick me

everywhere. I was agonising of pain. I thought that they will kill me.”

The report comments that “Usually removals are stopped when the pilot refuses to proceed, which may be because the detainee is screaming and / or because there is a physical struggle with escort staff occurring and the pilot considers it will be unsafe to fly.”

A total of 78 charter flights were arranged between February 2006 and March 2007, 60 of which were flights to Eastern Europe and 14 to Afghanistan. It is not known how many airlines are contracted out by the government for deportees, or what the budget is for this policy, though it is likely to be in the millions.

Many of those affected by this process are small children and babies, who may be separated from their parents for days or weeks. John Wilkes, chief executive of the Scottish Refugee Council, said, “The UK government has signed up to protect the rights of children under the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, but shamefully except for children in the asylum and immigration system.”

Many refugees and asylum seekers are suffering mental health problems as a result of the abuse they are subjected to. The report reveals that 85 percent have chronic depressive symptoms and 65 percent contemplate suicide. In 2007 there were 1,517 immigration detainees on “suicide-watch”.

Many of the abused immigrants were of uncertain legal status when they were detained or deported. In some cases the state “pre-empted” the legal process altogether by intervening before they had access to legal representation—clearly breaching the Geneva Conventions and International law.

The situation is so bad that the former Chief Inspector of Prisons, David Ramsbotham was forced to caution the government in the introduction to *Outsourcing Abuse*.

He states, “Of course there will always be cases that are less than genuine, and they must be dealt with accordingly. But every case must be investigated and, in line with the law of the land, individuals regarded as innocent until proved guilty. That applies to those whose cases are outlined in this dossier. If the Home Office, Ministers and officials alike, is sensible it will pay due attention to the dossier, which is not written in an emotive way, but contains constructive advice that should not simply be rejected.”

Ramsbotham’s exceedingly modest appeal is likely to fall on deaf ears.

Requests for further information under the Freedom of Information Act regarding forced removals on charter flights, as well as the government’s contract with the private security firms, have been rejected by the Home Office on the grounds of “commercial secrecy”. The same secrecy surrounds the detention centres used to hold asylum-seekers pending the outcome of their application. Seven out of 10 in the UK are managed by private companies on behalf of the Home Office.

Labour’s immigration minister, Liam Byrne, boasted in May, “We now remove an immigration offender every eight minutes—but my target is to remove more, and remove them faster.”

The government announced in August 2007 that it intended to “fast-track” the deportation procedure and in May this year announced a 60 percent increase in the number of detentions. Despite a 72 percent fall in asylum applications between 2002 and 2007, there has been a 106 percent increase in the number of applicants detained.

In Europe, in the name of combating “illegal immigration”, a Return Directive is being set up across the continent to send undocumented workers to neighbouring countries without any administrative formalities. This legislation will allow states to hold immigrants for up to 18-months and impose a five-year ban on their return to the EU. According to a representative of the European Association for the Defence of Human Rights, the Directive will establish detention as a “norm”.

The website Inter-Movement Committee for Evacuees commented on the new directive, “Retention has been slipping little by little into the logic of internment, transforming these centres into camps.”



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