

Immigrants protest ill treatment in UK detention centres

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More than 200 detainees being held in UK immigration centres staged hunger strikes in the three months from July to September this year.

The figures were obtained following a Freedom of Information request submitted by No Deportations, a voluntary group that provides information to those subject to UK immigration controls who do not want to leave the country, for whatever reason.

The Home Office, which is responsible for the detention centres, had initially refused to release the information relating to hunger strikes and suicide. An appeal by No Deportations was made to the Information Commissioner, who ruled that the Home Office had breached the Freedom of Information Act.

The highest number of hunger strikers, 66, was recorded at Brook House detention centre, near Gatwick airport. There were 35 hunger strikers logged at both Harmondsworth (close to Heathrow Airport) and Tinsley House, also near Gatwick.

One hundred nine suicide attempts were made in detention centres over the same period; 649 were placed on suicide watch—nearly 9 percent of those in detention over the period, with the highest number (106) at Brook House. The figures released record 393 attempted suicides in 2015, an increase of 11 percent over the previous year, with 2,957 placed on suicide watch that year.

Theresa Schleicher, the acting director of the charity Medical Justice, which offers independent medical advice and assessments to immigration detainees, told the *Guardian* the high numbers illustrated “the degree of desperation, frustration and sense of helplessness” faced by detainees.

Schleicher said that several of the hunger strikers seen by Medical Justice had “later been found to have been unlawfully detained and were found to have valid

protection claims.”

As well as hunger strikes and attempted suicides, there are a large number of incidents of self-harm by those in immigration removal centres. Over the five years 2011-2015 nearly 11,000 detainees were deemed “at risk” of self-harm, with 1,435 actual incidents being logged.

Stephen Shaw, the former prisons ombudsman and author of a critical report into the welfare of immigration detainees, said, “Levels of self-harm are critical indicators of the health of any institution and the welfare of those in detention. Many detainees are extremely vulnerable and experience high levels of anxiety and depression.”

On Monday last week, a legal challenge brought by Duncan Lewis Solicitors, supported by Medical Justice, was successful in gaining a temporary suspension of the far more restrictive definition of torture introduced by the government in September, and used to keep those affected in detention.

The narrower definition, hypocritically included in a new policy titled, “Adults at risk in immigration detention,” restricted torture to that only carried out by “state authorities.”

Submissions made on behalf of five asylum seekers showed how the restrictive definition had failed to protect vulnerable detainees with a history of ill-treatment, who had been unable to meet the new definition. These included an Afghan male kidnapped and tortured by the Taliban, a Nigerian man beaten and stabbed by a gang for being homosexual, and a Vietnamese woman who was tortured twice by loan sharks for a debt owed by her parents.

At the High Court, Justice Ouseley ruled that the Home Office must revert to applying its original definition of torture, which does not distinguish

between state and non-state actors. The full case will be heard in March 2017.

Speaking to the *World Socialist Web Site*, solicitor Lewis Kett, one of those representing the Duncan Lewis claimants, said the suspension of the restrictive definition of torture could “potentially affect hundreds of immigration detainees between now and the hearing in March, and may lead to many of the most vulnerable detainees being released.”

Commenting on the conditions facing those incarcerated while their asylum claims are evaluated, Kett said, “Detention continues to be an inhumane way of dealing with people pending their applications, especially in those cases where they have been a victim of torture, that they have mental health issues or may be trafficked.

“As a result, it’s not surprising to see hunger strikes and suicide risk in cases where people are either trying to get out of their misery or are protesting against their treatment and continued detention.”

During the court case, the Home Office announced it was reviewing the cases of 340 people identified between September 12 and November 18, who had claimed to be the victims of torture and may have been wrongly detained.

However, the numbers may be far higher, as Toufique Hossain, director of public law at Duncan Lewis, pointed out: “We know from NGO groups and other firms that there are others—given that non-state torture is a common feature in those who are traumatized.”

In August, the Home Office introduced a draft “Detention Services Order” (DSO) providing “guidance” to staff at immigration detention centres on the use of solitary confinement. Under the “Removal from Association and Temporary Confinement” rules, staff are advised that anyone being “stubborn, unmanageable or disobedient” can be placed in solitary confinement. Obliquely called “rule 40 or rule 42 accommodation,” staff can authorise this punishment for up to two weeks.

Where medical advice is that such confinement might prove life-threatening, staff are under no obligation to follow it, with the DSO stating it can be ignored as long as a note is made “clearly stating the rationale.” This can apply to those with serious mental health issues, who may be at acute risk of harm under such conditions.

Human Rights organisation Liberty said, “The use of limitless detention—unashamedly for administrative convenience and far removed from the enforcement of removal decisions—leaves a dark stain on this country’s human rights record.”

Liberty goes on to note considerable evidence suggesting that “segregation is used punitively and retributively as an arbitrary sanction for non-compliance with staff requirements.” It cites reports from Her Majesty’s Inspectorate of Prisons finding that segregation was used at the Harmondsworth Immigration Removal Centre as an “unofficial sanction for non-compliance ... when there is no risk of harm to staff or detainees,” contrary to the Detention Centre Rules.

In 2015, the numbers being detained, either pending a decision on their asylum application or their deportation, reached 32,466, up 7 percent over 2014.

These are people who have committed no crime, and yet they are incarcerated in squalid conditions, subject to arbitrary and inhumane treatment by their gaolers, who are often working for private companies. They represent the most oppressed and vulnerable layers of the world’s population. Many are the victims of wars, tyranny and grinding poverty, for which British imperialism bears a major responsibility.



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