

Tamil family fight UK plans to deport their seriously ill father

Simon Whelan
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Britain's brutal immigration system has been exposed once again over an attempt to deport a seriously ill elderly man. The authorities were forced to halt the deportation only after it became clear his life was seriously endangered.

On October 15, the Balachandran family, consisting of five adult Tamils, all with Australian citizenship, refused to board a deportation flight to Australia because they feared their father might have a fatal stroke if he was forced to fly. Sixty-one-year-old Sangarapillai Balachandran has had three strokes in the last six years and continues to suffer from high blood pressure which doctors link to stress.

Sangarapillai, a Sri Lankan Tamil by birth with Australian citizenship, says that each of his strokes occurred during periods of stress over his family's immigration case. His persecution at the hands of the Home Office has lasted for six years.

The Balachandrans' eldest daughter, Karthika, said she felt the Home Office was treating the family "like criminals" although they have broken no rules. A petition to try to prevent the family from being removed, launched by family friends and supporters, is currently approaching 15,000 signatures.

The family have twice agreed voluntarily to return to Australia this year, but on both occasions they were unable to travel because Sangarapillai was unfit. An expert medical report commissioned by the family concluded that Sangarapillai could be in serious danger if he was to fly.

This brutal treatment is being meted out to a family that have lived in the UK for years after Sangarapillai, a highly specialised engineer with expertise in water purification systems, was headhunted by a British company over 10 years ago due to a severe shortage of civil engineers with the specific skills he possesses. In the late 1990s, the family had emigrated from Sri Lanka to

Australia as part of a migrant recruitment programme and all the family had been granted citizenship there.

Karthika, 30, has learning disabilities but has worked for the past seven years as a voluntary administrator at St. George's hospital. Sinthuja, 28, gained a first-class economics degree at Queen Mary University and also passed the civil service fast-stream exams. A job with the civil service has been on hold dependent on resolving her immigration status.

Sinthuja said, "I have had to try extra hard to reach the same level as other people because I'm partially deaf, but I was determined not to let that hold me back. Now all that is going to waste. The Home Office is just a government department. I thought the government is supposed to be for the people."

Pranavan, 23, the family's only son, was accepted for a computer science degree at Queen Mary University but was unable to take up his place because of his precarious immigration status.

Sangarapillai fears for his life should he be forced to take a long-haul flight, which is well known to heighten the risk of strokes, especially for people who have high blood pressure. Sangarapillai is prescribed medication for his high blood pressure.

The Home Office is fully aware of the dangers to Sangarapillai's life should he be deported but insisted he was fit to fly on this occasion after a medical assessment. So determined were officials to remove Sangarapillai that no less than four paramedics and an ambulance were sent to escort him to the airport.

As the time to board the flight to Australia drew closer, Sangarapillai's blood pressure climbed to 169/113, which is close to someone needing "Emergency Care" but still the Home Office-appointed paramedics maintained that he was fit to fly. According to press reports Sangarapillai was disoriented and, at times, appeared only semi-conscious.

A medical examination was conducted by a psychiatrist, who is an expert in the connection between stroke and stress after the family refused to board the flight and at the request of the family's solicitor. The report states: "In my opinion, he is at very high risk of further CVAs (strokes) and possible life-threatening consequences because of high blood pressure due to high levels of stress." It said he was at risk of "life-threatening brain damage," was suffering from severe depression and was suicidal.

The family was told that they must leave together voluntarily or face the prospect of being forcibly removed separately in the near future. Pranavan told the *Guardian*, "We were told that, if we didn't board the plane, we will face forced removal by the Home Office further down the line and might be deported individually instead of as a family with my dad remaining here because of his poor health."

Under the UK's draconian immigration laws, the Balachandran family no longer have permission to work in Britain since Sangarapillai's work visa expired and the Home Office subsequently refused the family indefinite leave to remain. The family's problems began in 2012 when they applied for leave to remain in the UK and were refused. They subsequently won an appeal in July 2013, when the judge ordered the Home Office to reconsider the case. Officials then failed to write to the family for almost a year.

Finally in a letter addressed to the family's solicitors dated July 4, 2014, a Home Office official tersely explained, "It has come to my attention that indefinite leave to remain refusals of the above applications were not dispatched to your clients at the time they were refused and therefore they were not aware of the need to make an appeal."

Further court action was taken but ultimately the family's case was refused by the Home Office in February 2017. The family were granted exceptional case funding by the Legal Aid Agency to pursue a human rights claim, but said they had run out of time because the Home Office had already booked them on the mid-October flight.

After Sangarapillai was denied the right to work, the family became homeless and destitute having been forced to use up all their savings for day to day living. The family even spent one night sleeping at a Heathrow Airport terminal.

Beset by Sangarapillai's health problems and the two daughters' disabilities—and in absolute desperation at their plight—they appealed to the Home Office to be kept

in detention as an alternative to being on the streets.

However, the family found themselves in an intolerable situation akin to blackmail. Sinthuja explained: "The Home Office told us that our father was too unwell to be detained and agreed to put us up in a budget hotel next to the detention centre on condition that we signed papers to return voluntarily to Australia on Monday evening. We felt we had no choice but to sign as we cannot survive on the streets. But if we get on the plane our father might die."

The charity Medical Justice, which seeks to protect the health of immigration detainees, said it encounters up to three cases per month in which the Home Office attempt to remove people deemed medically unfit to fly.

Thousands of people are deported from the UK each year. Last year 12,666 people were forcibly deported from Britain on flights—an average of nearly 35 people a day. In just the three years from March 2014 to March 2017, a total of 40,039 people were subjected to "enforced returns." Significantly, as the ruling elite tightens up all aspects of immigration in the lead-up to Brexit, 12,585 of these were European Union nationals.

The treatment of the Balachandrans makes a mockery of the promises of reforms following the brutal death of 46-year-old father of five, Jimmy Mubenga, on a British Airways flight at Heathrow Airport during his deportation in 2010.

Only this year, another case of brutality against a man being deported was recorded by HuffPost UK. In the 20-minute audio recording, a man, Abdul, complains repeatedly about being physically and verbally abused during an attempted deportation from Britain aboard a Turkish Airlines flight.

The Socialist Equality Party demands that all attempts to deport the Balachandrans are immediately halted and their right to live and work freely in the UK be granted.



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