

*Barbed Wire Britain: Network to End Refugee and Migrant*

*Detention*

## VOICES FROM DETENTION

A collection of testimonies  
from UK immigration detainees  
in their own words

This is a collection of accounts by detainees in Tinsley House, Campsfield House, Rochester (HMP), Liverpool (HMP), Belmarsh (HMP), Lindholme, Harmondsworth, Yarlswood, Dungavel, Dover and Haslar. These are people for whom the unthinkable has happened. They have been imprisoned in the UK without charge, without conviction, without time limit. They have been imprisoned by the UK government, which boasts its democratic institutions.

If you are able to add another voice to these accounts, email [lizperetz@aol.com](mailto:lizperetz@aol.com). The collection will continue to grow on the website for Barbed Wire Britain [www.barbedwirebritain.org](http://www.barbedwirebritain.org) and to be printed regularly in hard copy until the voices can no longer be ignored and the practice of detention is ended.

### Introduction

Immigration detainees can be asylum seekers who have arrived legally and whose claims are being investigated. They may be detained because of a belief that they will 'disappear' otherwise. They can be people who have not arrived legally or who have overstayed their visas. Some are rejected asylum seekers awaiting removal. There are a few people who have criminal convictions and are being deported and there are some overlaps between the categories. All are detained on the orders of an immigration officer.

Britain currently has around 2000 immigration detainees in a range of specialist centres now called Reception Centres and Removal Centres. This number is due to double by next year - the government has promised 4000 places in these centres. Despite a promise that no more detainees would be held in prisons after 2001, up to 100 are still there. Most detainees are men, but women and children are also detained on some occasions. There is provision for up to 1000 women and children to be detained in Yarlswood, Harmondsworth, Oakington and Dungavel.

Immigration detainees have the right to apply for bail but this can be very difficult in practice. Many have no contacts in the UK and little chance of finding someone to stand surety for them. Access to good legal advice is difficult, as some of the accounts in this pamphlet describe, yet it is imperative if they are to be recognised as refugees. If you want to know more about this labyrinthine subject - the 'half world' of the Immigration 'courts' - contact Bail for Immigration Detainees (a list of contact details and web addresses is at the end of the pamphlet).

Some people spend years in detention. The helplessness, uncertainty and fear of deportation are extremely stressful, as these stories make clear. Some of those detained have been imprisoned or even tortured in their home country. Mental health problems are common and health care in detention is often poor. It can be very difficult for family or friends to visit because of the cost and travel problems. Visitors from local support groups can be very important.

Immigration detainees could be seen as the tip of the iceberg in terms of need. Those who are not detained suffer many of the same problems of fear, isolation and stress and are often very limited in their ability to move around and to communicate. For example, in big 'dispersal' hostels and in the proposed Accommodation Centres where all needs are supposed to be provided for, people have almost no cash to cover travel, telephones, letters and other necessities. Women sometimes feel very vulnerable to other inhabitants and those with babies and children find it very hard to manage in places like these.

The accounts in this pamphlet come from people who have been subject to immigration detention. They use the person's own words as far as possible and span the last 5 years. They are not in date order. The pamphlet has been put together by a small group which includes ex-detainees. We have tried to safeguard confidentiality as far as possible, unless the person wishes to be identified.

Ionel Dumitrascu, Gabriel Nkwele, Liz Peretz, Jo Garcia

### One

***The account that follows is from someone who was forced to flee from Nigeria. He is certain that if he returned his life would be in extreme danger. If he were to succeed in his request for asylum, he would enrich the UK with his many working skills. All he is asking for is a chance to work and get on with his life, while coming to terms with the trauma he has experienced. This trauma has been intensified by experience in detention.***

#### REMOVAL TO CAMPSFIELD – TRYING TO GET BAIL

I come from Nigeria. I have spent many months in Nigeria being persecuted and afraid for my life, after my livelihood was destroyed. I decided to leave Nigeria to save my life. I arrived in the UK in 2001 and in 2002 I am still been locked up in prison. What a life!

I am an asylum seeker detainee at Campsfield House; I was arrested at the airport. I claimed asylum on arrival but was detained at the airport from 9.15am until 1.30am in the morning of the following day. We arrived at Oakington in the very early morning. There at Oakington I spent eight days. It was there I had my asylum interview. Three days later I had the negative decision. I was immediately transferred to Campsfield House in Oxford. Since then I have been living my life in prison.

Since my detention, I have made several attempts to secure bail, but it was all refused. My first bail application was ten weeks after I was locked up in Campsfield. The adjudicator granted me bail on principle and instructed my sureties to go and lodge the sum of £1500 into the

solicitor's account and reappear with a fresh bail application one week later. My sureties did their best by raising the money and had all the bail requirements.

Unfortunately, when we reappeared as instructed at the same Birmingham Court, we met a different adjudicator who after cross examining my sureties, refused me bail because she said the amount lodged was too small as to guarantee my bail. She raised the money to £5,000, which demoralised my first surety and she backed out. Hence, I could not afford the £5,000 surety money. I decided to consult Bail for Immigration Detainees (BID) who applied bail for me a month later at York House London. At York House I went with two European citizens as my sureties with the sum of £1,200 including a Catholic reverend father who came and refereed for me. After the bail hearing, the adjudicator refused to grant me bail based on my nationality because I am a Nigerian. He wanted more money from my sureties. After another month, the same (BID) went back to court in York House for another bail hearing. That was the day we were given the highest humiliation in my life. In the presence of the three sureties that went to court with me and the £1,500 as surety money, the adjudicator did not allow Mr Tim Baster, who was my legal representative, time even to open up his case file before he dismissed my case and said that bail was refused. We were all amazed. What a miscarriage of justice!?

#### LIFE IN CAMPSFIELD HOUSE

In Campsfield House, life has not been very easy. There are three sections in the centre, Namely the blue, pink, and yellow blocks. There are also separate sections for administration and for the Immigration Officers whose duty is to carry out our removal orders.

Breakfast is from 7.30 –9.30am, lunch from 12noon – 1.30pm and dinner from 5-6.30pm. The food they serve is what the authority approved for the day. It is not what you might like to eat that particular day. Sometimes, they serve detainees rice without stew and if you complain, Group 4 will tell you, "that is why you left your country. If you don't like the treatment why not sign and go back to your country?" The food contributes 80% of the poor health condition of the detainees. Some always vomit after food. We are not allowed to take any food to our room. Even if you are sick and you cannot walk down to the canteen you cannot do this. If you request such a privilege, Group 4 will tell you that you are in a detention centre, where you have no rights, and no freedom.

#### FACILITIES

There is one library with two computers for typing only and four computer ball games. The library opens 9am-12.30pm, and re-opens 1.30pm – 11.30 pm daily. We have three television rooms which is highly restricted from broadcasting news. Only TV5 is allowed which gives news in brief. The other TVs remain permanently on sports, and MTV for music. There is one table tennis court, a room for physical health training, and a little pitch for football, which doesn't operate every day. There's also a hall for volleyball and cricket.

#### SANITATION

There are about five cleaning staff for the whole centre. They are here to be presented to visitors. How they clean the surroundings, ranging from the kitchen to the toilets is better seen than imagined. They only clean the entrance and passages. The toilets and bathrooms are left to the detriment of the detainees. Hence Group 4 and visiting staff have

their own separate facilities. Most of the detainees contract diseases through the toilets because they are being used by every detainee, and no disinfectant is used in washing and cleaning them. Sometimes the passage stinks. You can always perceive the odour while passing through.

#### MEDICAL

There is no long-term medical treatment as far as Campsfield House is concerned. But there is a health unit - which cannot be called an ordinary clinic because no useful consultation occurs there. Every ill-health matter is treated with stress tablets that knock you down. I was given a tablet that forced me to sleep for two days without ceasing. Weekends, there is no doctor available. Group 4 handles any emergency during the weekend. Detainees are not allowed to sleep in the hospital no matter how serious the problem is, the paramedics must return you back before day break.

Detainees with diseases like epilepsy, tuberculosis, asthma, chicken pox are mixed up with other healthy detainees. If you complain, the nurses will tell you it's immigration's fault, and immigration will tell you it is Group 4. Group 4 will refer you to the medical unit. At the end of the day nobody says they are responsible for detainees' health. There is one test case now - of chicken pox at Campsfield House. During the outbreak of this disease, the Chinese doctor who was on relief duty recommended the immediate release of the affected detainees and immigration accepted it. Unfortunately the doctor in charge of the health clinic resumed duty. He had been on leave. He cancelled the release of the rest of the affected detainees. Now all of us are sleeping in the same building making use of the same toilet and bathrooms that lead to further spreading of the disease.

In summary in Campsfield House detainees are not regarded to be human beings. It is only God that saves life here. Otherwise, there is gross negligence of the lives of detainees. Human Rights are being highly abused. Fighting in the centre, fire alarm, fainting of a detainee, missing property, which should all be matters for the civil police are all being handled by Group 4. A detainee has no right to call the police even if there are civil disturbances or riots in the centre. Important visitors are not allowed to see and talk with the detainees. There was a day a Minister from the Home Office came. He was not allowed to see the detainees. He only had a chat with the manager of the centre and Group 4 officials and he left.

It is called a detention centre but it is a complete prison, mere looking at the security net work shows you this. You will not be told that it is a prison yard, but it is. After the barbed wire, there is another high metal wall that is guarded all round with razor wire on top, to fortify the security even further. Last month in an attempt to escape four Kosovan boys broke their spines because they jumped from the roof to the ground. Several suicide attempts have been made, and many individual hunger strikes. A Russian went on hunger strike for 22 days and yet the doctor at Campsfield House medical unit recommended that he is still fit for detention.

A psychiatric patient (detainee) confirmed that he is suffering from panic attacks was deported with the sickness back to Zimbabwe. Confirmed and certified by three different doctors, yet immigration deported him with the sickness, Group 4 kept him in an isolation room before he was removed - to stop him from committing suicide. Campsfield House is hell fire on Earth

## Two

***The following account was given at a conference to end detention in Europe, in September 2000 in Oxford. HK is a Ugandan refugee, who spent 17 months in Harmondsworth and Tinsley House. He is still waiting for refugee status.***

"I'm from Uganda. I arrived in the UK in 1990 seeking asylum. After seven years my asylum was turned down. I went for appeal, through all the procedures. In 1998 I ended up in detention. So, I thought it would take me two to three months to get out. It was horrid. It took 17 months.

I managed to contact people from outside organisations: the Crossroad's Women's Centre, Payday Men's Network, Anti Deportation Campaign, other organisations. Some of them I didn't call, I just received their calls.

So I managed to hold on for 17 months. It wasn't easy. You see a lot of people dragged out, people deported, people screaming. You wake up early in the morning to see other people's fears. You wake up: several people's faces don't exist any more.

I really appreciated people supporting. When you see people try for you, you have to show...Because this detention business is really difficult. Before you get in there you just don't know what's happening inside, especially to women. The women have been separated from their kids. I believe some of you don't like to be separated from your cats, or other animals, when they're lost. I believe that to separate mothers from their kids is hard.

I don't know what happens in prison. I've never been in a prison. But in detention, we have men's wings, where the women don't go, and women's wings without the men going in. But when they come, the security, they walk in any time they want into the women's section. They come and go as they like.

You know, things happen in detention that make people's health not good. There was one man taken out for an operation. After it, he needed two people to support him going to the toilet. But the same day, they deported him.

I think these things...I don't know. ...At least *something* needs to be done.

One lady from Nigeria, her operation was denied. They realised that something could go wrong. They managed to rush to deport her. She was *really sick*. She collapsed a couple of times.

I know something needs to be done about the situation in detention."

## Three

***Gabriel Nkwelle had been held in detention in six institutions in England since 2001. The accounts that follow are excerpts from his letters from Rochester, Haslar and Belmarsh. The full letters can be found on the website for the Close Campsfield Campaign at [www.closecampsfield.org](http://www.closecampsfield.org) . He has finally been granted refugee status.***

"Appeal For Urgent Intervention!

Fellow human beings, fellow mankind, it is with great sincerity that I make this desperate appeal for your timely intervention in the horrifying and pathetic plight of asylum seekers in UK detained at HMP Rochester, Kent under Immigration Act 1971.

All subjected people have by right under universal standards and human principles the obligation to seek redress by any means internationally acceptable.

I hold the view that all men were created equal and by virtue of their existence are vested with certain inalienable rights to be the sole masters of their destiny.

This has not been the case with asylum seekers in UK detained at HMP Rochester who from the beginning, because of their accommodating attitudes, have been slowly stripped of their human rights. With the oppressor's mechanism of 02/10100, now working full time to completely dehumanise and emasculate our people no matter what means including genocide. It is therefore time for asylum seekers in Rochester, Kent, and humanity as a whole to fight back.

Many people may not readily understand or agree with the reasons why asylum seekers should be clamouring to restore their rights equally as any other human being.

Asylum seekers detained at the notorious HMP Rochester are treated worse than convicted criminals detained at the same HMP. Asylum seekers are held indefinitely without trial or initial decision on a claim made. This decision is taken by the Immigration Service which does not explain the decision in detail to the persons concerned.

Asylum seekers held at HMP Rochester, Kent, have fewer rights than suspected criminals and often do not understand why they are being held indefinitely. Not surprisingly, this causes mental anguish among detainees, many of whom may have already survived horrendous ordeals in their own countries. The whole process of asylum seeking and being detained for a lengthy period of time in UK is extremely humiliating and distressing.

The way to refugee status, is a long way to go. At HMP Rochester, Kent, the Echo and Delta wings where asylum seekers are been detained for this lengthy period, has rectangular dimensions of sixty by fourteen metres (60 x 14ms). Cells are four by four metres (4 x 4ms) toilet included, two inmates per cell. The sixty by six metres at the middle of the two buildings is for games. Inmates are not allowed to move beyond the sixty by six metre area. Echo wing houses one hundred and fifteen whilst Delta about sixty-five inmates. Out of twenty-four hours a day, you are allowed six hours only at the sixty by six metres area, whilst for eighteen hours you are locked up in your cell.

Being locked up makes you appreciate your freedom. Out of everything in life, losing your freedom is the hardest situation to deal with. No one listens in our society any more. If you put a foot wrong, you are never forgiven; "you are not allowed to forget". We should learn to forgive and forget for we can always reshape the future, but we can't reshape the past.

Inmates have attempted serious self-harm and nobody cares. Medication is a forgotten issue, if you happen to be sick, the grave should be your next home. Both medical and wing staff abuse asylum seekers racially, call them 'Kunta Kinte' and used words like "you all will be deported poor people, to the black coloured monkeys". It's awful. I

can't tell how awful I feel. The secret self ever more secret, unhappy misled; "unless you know where you are, you don't know who you are." In a recent survey of 02/10/00, several inmates were seriously brutalised by five Echo wing members of staff in my presence and that of other inmates for doing absolutely nothing.

Inmates from Delta report a Kenyan that had been detained for fifteen months by Immigration Service without trial roasted himself in his cell on the night of October 5<sup>th</sup>. None of the inmates knows his whereabouts as from that night to date. Life without freedom is a high price to pay.

Asylum seekers are kept in prison without charge, the sound of doors slamming and the ever-constant keys echoing around the wing, become our early morning wake up. If we are on remand, when are we going to be sentenced? It's a question without an answer.

Expired foodstuffs are always given to asylum seekers at HMP Rochester. When questioned, you are threatened to be taken to the segregation unit. On September 25<sup>th</sup> a verbal system was implemented by the governor, whereby asylum seekers detained at HMP Rochester must work seven hours in a workshop job for 0.25 pence per hour. He who refuses, is locked up till those in the workshop are back in the wing.

Today October 10<sup>th</sup> inmates are served with the workshop compulsory memo. For God's sake, where on earth is an adult human being forced to do a job not of his/her choice and to be paid 0.25 pence/hour? Is it modern slavery? Where are we? Third world or first world? Some inmates have been trying to draw the attention of media, but once you are noticed, you are transferred to the segregation unit.

On October, on the day I was to publish my appeal for urgent intervention, a member of education department whose name was not made known to me, betrayed me to the governor. At about 13.10 hours, five members of staff rushed into my cell, moved out my fellow inmate to the TV room and seized all the appeal papers printed ready to be dispatched. That governor ordered the seizure.

As a detainee have I not got the right to express my view to the media? We live at tiptoe stance never knowing what to expect next as thousands of asylum seekers live in internal exile being continuously hunted for outright elimination like dogs. To us as people, there can be neither peace nor progress where unrestrained repression, assimilation, exploitation and human inequality reign supreme.

To you comrades, also battling your own personal hell; I wish you courage and with God's blessings a happy ending to all your woes. It will also help all of us disadvantaged people, to get together and aid each other in any way possible. To all of you, whom God has blessed with justice, humanity's most cherished gift, human dignity and freedom, help us, the not so fortunate so we can have a semblance of it someday.

The situation now brewing here at HMP Rochester, has the potential of making the asylum seekers the flash point of a dangerous regional conflict. I cannot believe that anyone could imagine that detaining asylum seekers, or any other human being, in prison is the right thing to do.

My appeal for Urgent Intervention (letter of October 9<sup>th</sup> 2000) against HMP Rochester administration and the Immigration authorities resulted

in a removal from HMP Rochester on November 23rd 2000 to HOHC (Prison) Haslar.

HOHC (Prison) Haslar, being controlled by prison staff, is no different in its regime against asylum seekers held there. Today I have again exposed HOHC (Prison) Haslar administration and the Immigration authorities' ill treatment of asylum seekers held in there in my letter of 22/01/01 "Asylum Seekers Facing Life in Prisons (Behind Bars)." I have been moved unexpectedly from HOHC (Prison) Haslar to HMP Belmarsh on February 2nd 2001 as a punishment for my letter. At HMP Belmarsh asylum seekers (Immigration Detainees) are mixed up with remand and convicted prisoners

Reaching HMP Belmarsh, that became one of the prisons holding asylum seekers in October/November 2000, what I witness in the treatment meted out to immigration detainees held here is unbelievable, unacceptable to today's society and unwelcoming. It is against human nature.

- a) Asylum seekers are mixed up on spur or wing and in cells with convicted criminals and remand prisoners.
- b) Asylum seekers are "banged up" twenty-three hours out of twenty-four hours a day and some days they are "banged up" twenty-four hours.
- c) No access to incoming calls or FAX to/from solicitors in case of emergency or urgent letter/message.
- d) Asylum seekers are allowed to go to the canteen once a week and for one hour, 30 minutes or two hours only. If you happen to be late, no canteen for you that week.
- e) No respect for asylum seekers. Words like "the government is spending more on asylum seekers" and bullying by prison staff become first and second nature to asylum seekers at

Belmarsh. Despite the fact that bullying or racial language is unacceptable under prison rules.

f) Bibs must be worn by asylum seekers while in the social visits hall.

g) The food standard is another issue to be addressed. Poor cooking; rice is served to detainees often without sauce; quantity and quality of food served is unbearable. If you ask for more food, despite the poor quality, which only a few detainees like me are bold enough to ask, the reply you get from prison staff is "if you are not happy with the food, you find your way back to your country".

On February 6th 2001, I put in an application to see the number one Governor, which I have already discussed with a member of staff. He gave me the go ahead. Unfortunately this application was turned down by another member of staff, who said that I am not allowed to see the governor as a detainee. I consider this an abuse of Article 10 and 14 of the Human Rights Act.

A Somali asylum seeker detained at Belmarsh House block 3, was physically assaulted by a member of staff on February 12th 2001 at about 11.50 am. He had tooth ache pains. He drew the attention of a member of staff to take him to the health care. A member of staff came. Instead of taking the detainee to health care, he moved out his cellmate and butted him and beat his back on the wall, saying "You bloody fucking African. If you are sick go back to Africa". The member of staff was accompanied by two others. I refer this act to Schedule 1, Article 3 of the



Human Rights Act, as explained by para 3.24 of the Home Office Study Guide. Inmates opposite were witnesses to the drama.

There have been threats of mass suicide from asylum seekers detained in HMP Belmarsh as well as many attempted escapes. These are the reactions of desperate human beings who, having fled persecution in their own countries, suffer further hardship under Britain's much-criticised mandatory detention regime. Despite the fact that freedom from arbitrary deprivation of liberty is a fundamental human right - Article 9 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights states that "No one shall be subject to arbitrary arrest, detention or exile."

Despite political assurances that such a policy is intended for the benefit of "genuine" asylum seekers, the reality is that detention is a simplistic and ill-conceived method of deterring future arrivals of asylum seekers in the UK. A suitable welcome for asylum seekers would be one that validates their freedom, rather than placing them behind bars."

#### **Four**

***This account describes arrival in the UK, experiences of the immigration service and detention in Campsfield. It comes from a man from a European country who, after two years of being subjected to immigration bail restrictions, has finally won his case on appeal. He has been recognised as a refugee under the 1931 Geneva Convention. Since his arrival in the UK he has helped numerous other asylum seekers including detainees.***

I arrived in the UK in March 2000 at Terminal 2 at Heathrow, having a two-year multiple-entry visa. I went to the check-in desk and I said: "I

can't go back to my country and I'm asking for political asylum" and this guy looked at me and said: "It's not possible, you're joking. You came here tens of times, and what happens?" And I said, "No, I'm not joking. I'm really in trouble" So he said: "OK. Just wait" I had to wait for about three hours and I submitted, from the very beginning, all my documents, all my correspondence with Amnesty International, my personal ID documents, photocopies of my family's documents and things like this. I was taken to a small room in Terminal 2, and interviewed later that evening, about six o'clock - that was about six, seven hours after I came. The interview was not following the procedures that they are supposed to use for a proper asylum interview. I have made a complaint about these two days later. So, what they wanted to do, they wanted to extract some information, which is not relevant for the case. The immigration officer is actually instructed to conduct the case, to have full control of the case, and to make the case weaker. Because, you see, what happens with asylum policy, the law is made in order to restrict the right to asylum.

After the interview the Chief Immigration Officer took the decision to detain me. I knew about these things because there was quite a big possibility to be detained, being from a European country. I was taken to Campsfield House that evening about eleven o'clock at night. I was taken with a van and of course I was pretty shocked because it was the first time I had to be detained over all my life. In such case the first thing I was trying to do was to gather some information so I asked the people from Group 4 on arrival - basic things like how long I'm supposed to stay there and what happens with my case and solicitors and stuff like this. They were not very helpful and they responded in very general terms. One of my questions was, I asked them to tell me, what percentage of people got sent back to their country of origin once they were detained and all of the guys said about 40%, but now after a

few years I think there is more than that. Once in Campsfield, I was forced to stay there for 32 days until I got bail.

Life in Campsfield was very interesting because you expect some things would go a different way in a country like the UK which is supposed to respect human rights including the asylum seeker's human rights. So, I got to be introduced, got the induction. Induction is a kind of process that tries to scare you and to make you very fearful, what you do and how you behave and how you act and everything. My first concern was that the access to information was totally restricted; that was the big problem. I have learned that detention centres are actually for people to be detained and then removed to their country of origin, so if you have the bad luck to be detained you have very little chance of getting a good asylum process all the way. Your asylum claim tends to be extremely minimised because you have this handicap from the very beginning. They say your case is weak and they expect you will be losing and they keep you there until you finish all your rights of appeal and then you get removed. I have met a lot of people from different countries, some staying there for maybe one year, some of them for maybe a couple of weeks until they get out. Mostly this depends on the nationality and the legal representation. The big problem consists in legal representation and the fact that you don't have access to the information. You don't have any information related to the asylum process so you know nothing about the asylum claim and how they proceed with a case and everything. There is only one book *Immigration, Nationality and Refugee Law Handbook* by Mick Chatwin but that is kept under the desk and you must ask for it otherwise you will not get it. First of all they have no listed solicitors; they have only the Refugee Legal Centre and the Immigration Advisory Service - some small posters - and everyone knows what sort of service they provide. Most of the people that were stuck in detention were there because of a poor legal representation

and indeed sometimes you are better off without a solicitor, rather than having an incompetent legal representative. Some of them were detained because of a dodgy legal representation or because of their nationalities (the so-called countries free of persecution). Being from most European countries you get fast tracked. You have a certified case, which tend to be two or three months long and then you get removed.

After I got detained the next move was to get a solicitor. It took me about three or four days until I got a solicitor. What happened is that I went to the library and I got Mick Chatwin's book and I could see the name of the Campaign to Close Down Campsfield and I rang the two numbers listed and I had the chance to speak to Teresa Hayter. I told her about what happened and everything about me and she said, "OK, I'll help you with a solicitor." and she introduced me to Elizabeth Millar – one of the best private solicitors from London who actually bailed me in April 2002. The funny thing is that I have made a complaint two days after I arrived at Campsfield because I felt I was not properly assessed in my interview and the immigration officer abused the system. So what happens is that they responded to this complaint after about 25 days or so but they excluded the relevant information that I was referring to, especially about things not working properly.

Back to Campsfield, everyone was very nervous and every minute was very hard to get on; you are wasting your life there doing nothing and just waiting, waiting for some good news from a solicitor or some decision from immigration. There was a very boring schedule, apart from having the six regular everyday dishes and rotating them, very poor quality food. The soap was unimaginable to use it; I think nobody would buy this in a shop and the toothpaste had the date expired for two years - I have a sample with me now. The library was having a few

thousand books and some foreign language books but not all the languages, obviously. You could read newspapers every day; the major daily newspapers from UK, plus newspapers for other nationalities like Albanians and some Arab press. Also they had some French language newspapers. Not too many recreational facilities - you had a gym where you could play some volleyball or handball or even football. They also have quite a nice space for exercise equipment and people were doing this lifting and keeping fit and everything. Every week they put some movies on - videos - and I remember that they used to put a video on a Saturday when the demonstration done by Campaign to Close Campsfield was outside taking place, just in order to distract the attention of the people.

The health facilities were very poor. The doctor was coming, I think, on a twice a week basis and you had to put yourself on a list and you had to first see the nurse and then if she considered that your case was pretty difficult she would refer you to the doctor. I have assisted some people with translation and I have to go to the doctor with them and I was really not very well impressed about the service that they provide and the only thing was they were just taking your blood pressure and giving you some paracetamol. Paracetamol was the most common medication for any disease. I know that people were waiting for some operation.

Talking about Group 4, I remember that I was asked to do a translation for an induction for a new guy and he asked me specifically to translate to this new detainee. This guy said, "If you give us shit we will give you back more shit". So he asked me specifically to translate this. I think they have a policy of people being subjected to a high dose of fear and not to do any foolish things. I have been once to the information desk and asked for the UNHCR telephone number and I was very surprised

to receive a response that they don't have this but this guy was pretty helpful and said, "Look, try the enquiries on the phone and they'll give it to you." So I just rang when I could UNHCR because they are quite concerned of what happens in detention and they still give me a ring from time to time to ask me how I'm going with my case and everything. I managed to contact also the Terminal 2 at Heathrow, Immigration Service and they were not very helpful in discussing with me because I made a complaint and I think they were instructed not to say too many things.

I can say something about a European who had to be removed to Germany because he was a third country case. So this guy had the notice of removal, but he tried to mutilate himself so he actually cut himself on the belly and the arms and on the chest with a razor blade. They took him to the hospital and after a few days he was back. He was with guards in a special room, supervised and they actually managed to remove him later that week. He was very much afraid that after being sent to Germany he would be sent back, but the good thing is that he gave us a ring when he reached Germany, and in Germany they don't detain you so he was left quite OK to live, with social services and everything, so he was quite happy.

Visitors were a very important issue. When you had a visitor, I mean, from a morale point of view it was very positive. You had some confidence that someone is interested in your case and that things are going to be OK. I managed to have a visitor, sent by Asylum Welcome, who was also my surety, who agreed to stand surety for £2000. After two years she was discharged of this so she is very happy that she could help, and also I'm very happy that I got help in this respect. There were some people that did not have visitors. I cannot say how they felt about it but I think they felt very miserable that nobody is interested in

them, just a phone call or something. I think detention was probably what motivated me to do what I am doing at the moment, being involved in cases of asylum seekers being detained, doing bail things, assisting them with advice as a registered caseworker on immigration and asylum matters.

Detention was probably my second important experience after living under a communist regime for almost 30 years, that in the end proved to be beneficial and self-motivating.

### *Five*

***Highlights from the Campsfield Monitor 1998. Conditions are shown to be deteriorating.***

#### Conditions at Campsfield: a detainee comments

'Before the press came to visit Campsfield, they brought in computers and books, and their attitudes changed. They told some newly arrived detainees that they must play in the gym (which is something we never do, we are too depressed, we just stay in our rooms) - and they gave them cigarettes as an inducement. What they showed the press was not the reality. They subject us to racist abuse. I arrived in September last year; we had to knock on our doors if we wanted to go to the toilet, and we could only smoke in the corridors.'

'When you are under stress, they take advantage of it to provoke you. If you react, you are sent to prison. They have lists; the people they want to pursue get three stars on these lists. There are many very unhappy people here, they cannot telephone, and they have no contacts outside. It's moral torture; I'm not exaggerating, I haven't invented anything.'

They are now building metal doors inside Campsfield, like prison. There are new microphones and loudspeakers, very disturbing. They have changed the door on the mosque, so that there is a window and a camera. When we asked a Group 4 guard not to walk wearing his shoes on the carpet in the mosque, he said 'I hate Muslims' - so there was trouble; a detainee was wounded and had to have an operation.'

'For three or four days all except one of the toilets and showers were closed; people were queuing.'

'The doctor is no good. When I was ill, from the effects of persecution in my country, the guards ignored me and stopped other people from helping me; eventually they took me in handcuffs. People are not examined when they are suffering. If there is a medical emergency, you have to wait for the doctor's hours, sometimes the next day.'

'All the Group 4 guards are the same. They don't care at all. They laugh at you, they try to ridicule people, and they go into your room without knocking. It's they who provoke the detainees. They say and do really racist things. There are no good ones; if there were, I don't think they would last.'

#### Plain rice, scalding water and an injury in segregation: facts of life in Campsfield

Detainees report that for several days last summer they were served with plain white rice 'without sauce', by which they mean rice on its own, unaccompanied by meat or vegetables; they resorted to butter and eventually complained, a bold act which may have led to the removals to prison and the events which followed on 20 August 1997. Others ventured to complain about the fact that the water was so hot that they

could not take showers, and that 'drinking water' was available only from the toilets.

One detainee was removed to the new segregation unit in a Portakabin at the back of the camp; when he came out the next morning, his hand was bleeding and he told fellow detainees that he had been attacked with a screwdriver. After this he was so scared of Group 4 that he would only go to the toilet if friends came with him.

### **Six**

***This short piece is the only one from a woman who has been detained.***

I am Nigerian. The father of my baby is a British citizen and lives in London. He wants me to come and is doing all he can to help. When I came to Heathrow the immigration officer said I must go to Ireland, so I had to go there. Then I flew to England again. They told me I could not claim asylum here because I had claimed it in Ireland. I was detained. I have been five months in detention. I have had no antenatal care. They took me to the hospital for a scan, but we were too late for the appointment and they sent me away. The officers did not tell me about it earlier because they said they were afraid I would abscond. I am very worried about the baby. I cannot eat and I keep vomiting.

### **Seven**

***A speech given at the Conference to Defend Asylum Seekers, held at Cross Street Chapel, Manchester, Saturday March 23rd 2002***

Many years ago when I was growing up my mother said to me: My son, when you are in the majority, yours is the test of tolerance—but beware,

when you are in the minority yours will be a test of courage. It's only when I had given up on growing any further that the true implications of that wisdom came to my realisation.

I came to this country a few years ago still a teenager. My true testimony to you brothers and sisters is that I never set out to deceive, steal from the economy and I certainly never attempted to exploit the hospitality presented to me, never. Yet, like any other asylum seeker, I have found that to be the stigma attached to me. It is painful that I have become the subject of politicians' competition on who can hit me harder, who can teach me the most unforgettable lesson.

My friends this time two years ago I was in prison having committed no crime, just being an asylum seeker. I had spent a day in a police cell in Salford following an early morning raid by the police and immigration squad at my house. During the five days I was locked up at Manchester Airport I found that they were to take me to a place where they took people like me: Illegal Immigrants.

It was all gloomy as I was shackled under guard into a Wackenhutt security van heading to Harmondsworth detention centre just outside Heathrow. I was merely on transit there as the next day I was put into another security van to HMP Haslar. There I was greeted with tall walls, big gates and forceful prison guards. They ordered me to strip naked and did a complete body search on me. Then they gave me a prison toothbrush, a prison wash kit, prison boots and prison uniforms. They took photos of me, gave me a prison identity card and that was the way it was going to be – that was the place where they locked up people like me, as I was told two days earlier.

I believe the thinking of the authorities in detaining us asylum seekers is that:

- we become isolated from those who support us
- become hopeless
- assassinate our personalities
- teach us a lesson in a way that the fear of being detained acts as a deterrent to others in need of protection through the asylum system. The fact that I felt so humiliated during my detention and even after is not just a consequence but the primary aim of the policy.

Detention was for me the lowest point of my life. Those were the most difficult days of my life. The hardest thing about that existence is the repetitive cycle:

I woke up every morning behind the same bars, surrounded by the same tall walls that greeted me on my arrival there, ate the same food, and ended being locked up at the same time by the same indifferent prison guards. Everyday my stomach used to churn as fellow detainees were being removed and sent back, in most cases at a very short or no notice at all.

During my time in Haslar I witnessed a lot of fellow asylum seekers going clinically insane. In a confinement like that I can assure you that, like many other fellow asylum seekers, I found it easier to contemplate suicide than not to. And I did contemplate suicide, and I think I probably would have gone ahead with it if I hadn't lost my sister two months earlier. A few others went ahead with attempting it.

The day I arrived at Harmondsworth I was told that a detainee had committed suicide and was found hanging from the roof the day before.

In Haslar an Egyptian asylum seeker attempted to take his own life after his asylum case was rejected. In both of these cases, and a lot others there was no inquiry, the detainees who had injured themselves were simply taken away with fellow detainees told nothing about their wellbeing or whereabouts.

Any sort of uprising against the system would be punished by sending the people responsible to harsher mainstream prisons.

I am trying to explain things that happened to me or around me in my detention days – but these are tales of two years ago experienced by one asylum seeker.

It is shocking that the approach of the government towards us asylum seekers has become more heavy-handed. The latest government White Paper on asylum and Immigration contains detention as the central policy. There will be more and more asylum seekers condemned into detention centres. There has also been an introduction of reporting centres run by the Enforcement Officers with security provided by likes of the notorious Wackenhutt, for example Dallas Court in Salford Quays where asylum seekers within 25 mile radius of Salford are required to report to at a specific time and date. I have no doubt that centres like these have been created as a facility for imminent detention and removal of asylum seekers. I am aware that there are plans to build a new such site at Great Dunmow near Stansted Airport with a holding capacity of 500 detainees.

I am also informed of the situation at Dungavel Asylum Prison in Scotland where one particular example highlights the monstrous attitude of the detention regime: A Roma family with 2 children under 5 years old – one child with badly deformed feet and the second is a double

amputee. The parents have also been put in suicide watch. In the same prison a young man from Nigeria has been imprisoned, he is also on suicide watch and in isolation from other inmates.

Not so long ago disaster struck at Yarl's Wood. That was a tragic event but one that highlights the immoral dimension of detention as a policy. I want to particularly examine the reaction coming from those who hate us asylum seekers – a local MP, a Conservative, did his best to cause hysteria in the local community by telling residents to exercise caution as missing detainees were dangerous and capable of crime. The authorities ruled outright that the missing detainees had escaped without any investigation carried and while there was still a possibility that some may have died in the fire. But that is the sort of outlook we have been presented with as asylum seekers – with the authorities obsessed with appeasing the right wing and racist brigade by viewing and treating us with contempt and suspicion.

When I was released from prison after two and a half months there I was required to report at a police station every Monday, Wednesday and Friday between 7 and 8 p.m. That was for a year. I am still reporting every Monday. In return for staying away from the cage I have so far made at least 200 visits to that shop – it looks like I still have a long way to go as they have no plans for internet shopping yet. Upon my release I was put on the voucher scheme receiving £28.00 a week in food vouchers with no cash at all. I was not allowed to work which I found rather ironical as I was allowed to work in prison – but there was a catch: I was cheap labour and they could pay me a maximum of £10 a week. Apart from the support I had from outside, the one thing that inspired me to get through the turmoil of those days in prison was the anger and hate I had towards the system around me. There was still a

thing or two I could pick to rebel against—I refused to be cheap labour and so I never took employment in prison.

Friends and comrades I am very sure that if the authorities have their way they would lock up all asylum seekers in asylum prisons and detention centres. We have been called liars, scroungers, illegal immigrants etc. Severe consequences have followed as a result of those accusations. Some asylum seekers have survived the consequences, some have not – but a lot, like myself, continue to suffer through them. My mother's wisdom rings true— it is a test our courage.

My conscience is very clear, friends and comrades:

- The biggest scroungers this world has ever seen are the agents of colonialism and imperialism who were sent by the British Empire, they used force and deception to occupy and exploit our beautiful lands.
- Not I. Not my brother Bayo. Not my friend there—the illegal immigrants were those men and women sent to our lands by the British Empire who used trickery and assumed legitimacy to occupy and exploit our beautiful lands.

We asylum seekers cry for the imprisonment we are being subjected to. So friends and comrades I am inviting you to join us in, not necessarily crying with us, but helping us through our crying by opposing detention as a policy. I am inviting you to discuss ways in which we can oppose this hideous policy with a collective initiative.

### **Contacts**

If you want to know more about action on immigration detention and other individual cases here are some organisations you can contact.

Barbed Wire Britain – [www.barbedwirebritain.org.uk](http://www.barbedwirebritain.org.uk)

Network to end migrant and refugee detention.

BID – [www.biduk.org](http://www.biduk.org)

Bail for Immigration Detainees – London office Tel: 020 7247 3590

AVID – [www.aviddetention.org.uk](http://www.aviddetention.org.uk)

Association of Visitors to Immigration Detainees – Box 7, Oxted, RG8 0YT

Medical Foundation – [www.torturecare.org.uk](http://www.torturecare.org.uk)

Caring for victims of torture – 96-98 Grafton Rd, Kentish Town, London NW5 3EJ

Refugee Council – [www.refugeecouncil.org.uk](http://www.refugeecouncil.org.uk)

3 Bondway, London SW8 1SJ Tel: 020 7820 3000

Refugee Legal Centre – [www.refugee-legal-centre.org.uk](http://www.refugee-legal-centre.org.uk)

An independent, not-for-profit, legal advice centre for refugees and asylum seekers. 153-7 Commercial Rd London E1 2DA Tel: 020 7780 3200

Asylum Aid – [www.asylumaid.org.uk](http://www.asylumaid.org.uk)

A charity providing free legal advice and representation to refugees and asylum seekers. 28 Commercial Rd London E1 6LS

NCADC – [www.ncadc.org.uk](http://www.ncadc.org.uk)

National Coalition of Anti-Deportation Campaigns

JCWI – [www.jcwi.org.uk](http://www.jcwi.org.uk)

Joint Campaign for the Welfare of Immigrants

Prison Reform Trust – [prt@prisonreform.org.uk](mailto:prt@prisonreform.org.uk)