

Gatwick Detainees Welfare Group Newsletter, Spring 2002

Welcome to the spring edition of the Gatwick Detainees Welfare Group newsletter. This time there's a sad goodbye from Martyn, who has been co-ordinator of GDWG since April 2000. He will be missed by everyone. We hear from new visitor, Stephen Xiong, and from Stephanie Lam, the TEFL teacher at Tinsley House. If you have any comments about this newsletter or how the next edition can be improved, please send suggestions or articles to the office.

TWO YEARS AT THE GDWG Martyn Williams

It was in March 2000 that I got a call from Felicity inviting me to join the GDWG as Co-ordinator. I was really excited about joining the group, and from my previous work at Bail for Immigration Detainees I knew a bit about the GDWG and the dedication of their volunteers. I had worked previously with the Red Cross as a volunteer for a refugee befriending project, and so I knew how this kind of project works for immigrants.

It is hard to imagine what it is really like for people who arrive here and end up spending time in a British detention centre. We can put ourselves in their place and think – what it would be like to be visited by a kindly and concerned stranger? Personally I think that I would be glad that someone cares about me, and relieved to talk to someone who listens and who has different problems to mine. During my time here, I have witnessed some wonderful relationships that have been built between volunteers and detainees.

It has been a massive learning curve for me and I have really enjoyed my time here. I have especially enjoyed working with such an enthusiastic and dedicated group of volunteers, and with the people who are held at Tinsley House, who are so ready to make us their friends and confidants.

One of the more difficult things for me has been the realisation that the Immigration Service's interests are very different from our own. Their priorities are effective containment and efficient removal of detainees. This has resulted in disappointing breaches of human rights, perhaps most notably the incidence of immigration detainees being held in prisons up until last Christmas – spending up to 23 hours a day in cells, without trial. At Tinsley we come across torture and trauma victims, unaccompanied minors who have sometimes been trafficked to the UK, and immigrants who have been held for over one year in different detention centres – some having very little knowledge about why they are detained. They often have few visits from their friends or family, which makes the work of the visitor so necessary.

Mercifully, most are now detained for much shorter periods. We are still needed to help detainees – we have been busier than ever this year – but we often see detainees only once or twice before they are removed, or transferred to another centre.

Many times over the past year I have talked to people at Tinsley who have just arrived in the UK. Often they apply for asylum, and when they do they are transferred to Oakington reception (detention) centre near Cambridge, where their claims are fast-tracked by the Home Office. They are given a decision within 10 days, and for 99% of them it is a refusal. Incredibly, Zimbabwean asylum seekers are taken to this centre and are refused asylum, despite the well publicised problems. I am moving on to work for the Refugee Legal Centre at Oakington where I will be legally representing asylum seekers. Rather depressingly I worked out that statistically I could work all year and not get a single acceptance from the Home Office for any of my clients! Fortunately, many will go on to win at their asylum appeal hearings. I am planning on following a legal career if I enjoy the work.

Finally, it is only left for me to say thank you very much for making me feel welcome here. I have really enjoyed getting to know you all and I really hope to meet you again. What you are doing is so valuable, and I hope that you will continue to befriend for as long as there are strangers in need at Tinsley House.



Martyn wrapping Christmas presents with visitor Gloria Bird

TEFL TEACHING AT TINSLEY HOUSE Stephanie Lam

I have been teaching English at Tinsley House since September 2000. Before March 2001 the morning was divided into three structured classes: Beginner, Elementary and Pre-Intermediate,

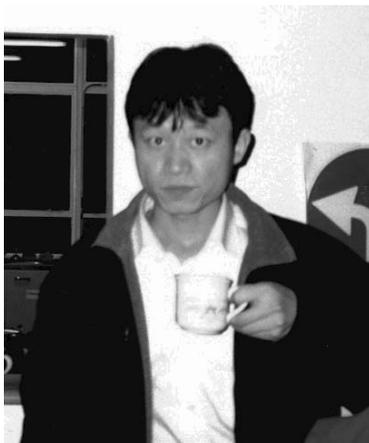
with about 50 minutes for each lesson. When Tinsley House became a removal centre, I had to completely change the way the classes were organised.

Now that people are coming and going so frequently the classes have become drop-in sessions, and I try to give whoever comes in something appropriate for their level. If students are of a similar level I group them together, although this still means that there will be several different classes occurring at the same time. The students still work through a course, although I have had to adapt the exercises in order to suit the nature of the class.

The atmosphere in the classroom is friendly and encouraging. The large majority of the students are keen to learn, and it is very satisfying to welcome people with little or no English and see them improve rapidly, even in the space of a few weeks. If students stay for long enough to finish a course they take a test and receive a graded certificate, which gives them a sense of achievement and a feeling that their time in Tinsley House has not been wasted.

VIEWS FROM A CHINESE STUDENT VOLUNTEER
Stephen Xiong

I am a Chinese student coming from the south part of China. Presently I am studying at the University of Brighton. This is my first time travelling abroad. Being so far away from home and staying in a country that is so different from your own motherland can be exciting but also difficult. So when I was taking advantage of the summer holiday time to explore more life beyond the school, I found out about the detainee centre. I understood how it feels like being an asylum seeker from other country with their special background. I could feel they need help, more than we international students do for coping with the studying or living problems, that any help, small or big, would always make a difference. With this feeling, I decided to become a volunteer so as to get more involved with them hoping therefore I myself could be of any least help to them.



After having a tour of Tinsley House, I would say that as a place of gathering detainees, it is quite nice. Its considerate

facilities, friendly service and nice surrounding go beyond my imagination. It surely gives a nice first impression for asylum seekers and some of the detainees I visited there said so. With people visiting them, detainees can be more open with their mind, sharing friendly conversations with visitors, which could help them release their suppressed emotions or nervousness making them cheer up and see more positively towards their future. Though with all this help from the GDWG and visitors, they still have some worries on their mind, one big thing is problems with solicitors. They have been constantly complaining that their solicitors delay in dealing with their case. Nobody wants to be kept within a place with not much freedom. It seems to me although the British government has already done well in dealing with asylum seekers, there is still much to be done to make a more devoted country in terms of democracy and freedom.

FOCUS ON KOSOVO
Pascale Noel

Kosovans are the largest group of detainees that GDWG comes into contact with. Many face return to an uncertain future in a volatile country that, '...simply cannot sustain large numbers of destitute returnees' (Refugee Council Kosovan Update, July 2001).

During the conflict, some Serbian politicians argued that Serbia has an historical claim to Kosovo as its territory. This view stems from when the Ottoman Turks invaded Kosovo and defeated the Serbian Prince Lazar, in 1389. Indeed as one commentator has said, 'The Canterbury or Westminster of the Serb nation is located in Kosovo'. 1918 saw the formation of Yugoslavia and Kosovo was granted autonomy in 1974, giving it almost the same rights as Yugoslavia's other republics. This was repealed in 1989 by Milosovic – resulting in violent protests and the boycotting of state institutions by many of the 90% ethnic Albanian population. Kosovo declared independence in July 1990 - which Serbia refused to recognise. Violence escalated leading to war - thousands of civilians died, 200,000 were internally displaced, 70,000 became refugees in neighbouring provinces and 100,000 sought protection abroad.

4427 refugees came to the UK under the UN's humanitarian emergency evacuation programme in 1999. Others came independently. Most were granted ELR for two years. By October 2000, over 55% who came on the UN programme had returned voluntarily and large numbers have returned since. Many Kosovans we meet are well established in this country – often having married here, had children, gone to college etc... They are often devastated to return.

The situation back home appears far from stable, as recent reports from UNMIK (The United Nations Interim Peacekeeping Force) and UNHCR suggest. In March last year, UNMIK advised that people should not be returned who originate from places where they represent an ethnic minority; people in mixed marriages or of mixed ethnicity; those who

worked with the Serbian regime or are perceived to have been collaborators. These groups still face a threat to their security.

Although the process of rebuilding Kosovo is well underway, conditions remain bleak for returnees. Basic healthcare needs can now be met but those with severe medical problems should not be forcibly returned. Mental health services are severely limited, with only one psychiatrist per 100,000 inhabitants and no psychiatric hospital. Unemployment is high, at 65% in December 2000. Limited social assistance is available for families not capable of working that have elderly members or school-age children to support. If a family member is capable of working then they will only qualify if they have children under five and are without other resources. The Refugee Council suggests – ‘Those who are not eligible for social assistance may face the prospect of spending an indefinite period of time on limited food aid.’ Some emergency accommodation, which consists of tents or basic communal shelters, is available. It is hard to imagine the hardships facing the families with small children who have been returned from Tinsley House this winter. To conclude, UNMIK has warned that ‘...the return of homeless Kosovars without strong family or community ties (could) potentially reverse the enormous progress made this far and further heighten insecurity in the region’.

For further information:

Refugee Council Kosovan Update – July 2001 (ask GDWG office for a copy)

CHRISTMAS PRESENTS

The Christmas present collection was an overwhelming success this year. Thank you to everybody who donated gifts, which may have helped make Christmas a bit more bearable in detention. Thanks also if you bought GDWG cards at Christmas. It really makes a big contribution to our income and this year we raised nearly £800.

THE JESUIT REFUGEE SERVICE Anne Locke

I have recently been involved in helping a refugee trace her children and secure their arrival in this country. This has been a frustrating and lengthy process that has now thankfully been concluded and the children are re-united with her in Britain. During this process I came into contact with the Jesuit Refugee Service (JRS) which is an international Catholic organisation, at work in over 50 countries, with a mission to accompany, serve and defend the rights of refugees and forcibly displaced people. Although they initially couldn't help with the tracing process they offered many useful contacts. Part of their work in the UK focuses on asylum seekers in detention, through visits, phone calls and letters. JRS also undertakes advocacy work and campaigns on behalf of asylum seekers, running workshops and lobbying at an EU level. They are also actively engaged in the strengthening of Church networks working with asylum seekers and refugees, including the setting up and management of the national Catholic Refugee Forum. They also work closely with non-Church agencies through the Asylum Rights Campaign, which is a coalition of 100 different secular and non-secular agencies.

They produce the *JRS-UK Newsletter* and the recent edition includes up to date information about Mr Blunkett's new proposals for the asylum system. If you would like to receive information from JRS, or help in their work, contact them at 112 Thornbury Road Osterley Middlesex TW7 4NN (020 8847 3555). If you shop at Sainsbury's you could send your Sainsbury's Reward Vouchers to them and they will distribute them to Asylum Seekers.

REPORT ON THE BID OUTREACH PROJECT Anna Jackson, Outreach Worker

If someone you are visiting wants to make a bail application, the best person for him or her to contact is their legal representative. In some cases representatives consider themselves unable to represent a detainee at a bail hearing. This might be because they do not feel the detainee has sufficient chance of success to justify using public funding.

Bail for Immigration Detainees (BID) makes bail applications on behalf of immigration detainees in cases where the legal representatives are unwilling or unable to act. We are a small organisation, but there is a very high demand for advice and assistance on bail issues. There are also many detainees who are keen to find out more about their rights and work on their own cases. We have therefore been compiling a notebook on bail for detainees, which will be available soon.

The notebook will include standard letters that can be used by detainees to instruct their legal representatives, to obtain the reasons for their detention from the Immigration Service and to collect information on possible sureties or accommodation. By

explaining what a detainee's rights are in relation to bail, we hope that detainees will be more able to discuss their cases with their representatives. By enabling detainees to collect supporting information, bail applications will hopefully get to court more quickly. There may even be some detainees who want to take their own applications to court!

Whilst there are some detainees who are willing and able to prepare their own cases, there are many who need more support and assistance. Part of my work as Outreach Worker will be assisting more vulnerable detainees, such as detained families, to get their bail applications into court.

DETENTION AND ASYLUM NEWS

- ❑ HMIP is carrying out inspections of the following detention centres; Tinsley House, Lindholme, Haslar, Campsfield and Oakington. Reports on the individual institutions are due out this spring, with a comparative report expected towards the end of the year.
- ❑ The government's asylum white paper may have local implications. It sets out plans for 'Induction Centres', where newly arrived asylum seekers will have access to health checks, legal advice and be given an induction briefing. A pilot centre has been opened in Dover, run by the charity Migrant Helpline. Once this has been evaluated, it is projected that another centre in the southeast will open and the Gatwick area has been indicated as a possible location.
- ❑ Following the fire at Yarl's Wood detention centre, some female detainees were transferred to Tinsley House. Many were in shock and lost their belongings in the fire. As a consequence, Tinsley House will now be fitted with a sprinkler system.

AVID UPDATE Helen Ireland

- ❑ The AVID Conference is on 11th May 2002 at Vaughan House, Victoria from 10 – 4 pm. This year the subject will be **The White Paper – Changing Role of Visitors** so please book this date now! Amongst other topics, workshops will look at how visitors can cope with the fast turnover of detainees.
- ❑ The Dover Removal Centre will take in immigration detainees from 1st April 2002 and will operate under Detention Centre Rules like Haslar (Portsmouth) and Lindholme (Doncaster). A visitors' group is being formed and trained and as soon as contact numbers are available, these will be circulated.
- ❑ All detainees who were held in prisons under the scheme which started last February, are now in Removal Centres.

However, with Yarl's Wood being so badly damaged, we fear that prison places may again be used.

- ❑ AVID has a new telephone number for Helen Ireland: 01883 717275.

REFUGEE WEEK 2002 Pascale Noel

Refugee Week takes place on the 17 – 23 June 2002. We are thinking about organising an event and are looking for suggestions and ideas. We're also interested in hearing from anyone who is organising something in their local area. The Refugee Council has further information about the week on the internet and has also published a pack to help people to organise an event; www.refugeecouncil.co.uk. The Refugee Week enquiry line is 020 7820 3055.

GDWG BULLETIN

- ❑ Welcome to all new volunteers who have recently started: Anna Cooke (Crawley), Katherine Mann (Brighton), Veronica Horska (Brighton) and Stephen Xiong (Brighton). A sad goodbye to Lucy Wingate who has been a dedicated visitor for many years. Lots of people are currently interested in volunteering and 18 people attended the last information session.
- ❑ If you have been thinking that you might stop visiting but are still committed to detainee welfare at Tinsley House – the Visiting Committee (similar to the board of visitors at a prison) is currently short of members. The participation of an experienced visitor would be invaluable to the committee. Please contact the office if you are interested.
- ❑ Please make sure you keep an eye on your belongings whilst checking in at Tinsley. Martyn recently had his mobile phone stolen whilst at the reception desk.
- ❑ It is hoped to run a training course in April. Details to follow.
- ❑ The BBC have given us a copy of the 'Welcome to Britain' series, shown last autumn. The last programme was about detention and was partly filmed at Tinsley House. Contact the office if you would like to borrow the video.
- ❑ The Refugee Council is entering runners in the British 10k open road race, which takes place on Sunday 21st July. For more details call Abby Rudland at the Refugee Council 020 7820 3135.
- ❑ Local Group Meetings
Brighton 23rd April, 7.30 pm, ask Anna Seddon for details
Horsham 15th April, 7.30 pm at St John the Evangelist Church Hall, Springfield Road, Horsham
Reigate 7th May, 7.30 pm at Ann Locke's house
Crawley 15th April, 5.30 pm at the GDWG office
Oxted 30th April, 7.30 pm at Don Cooper's house

