

Gatwick Detainees Welfare Group Newsletter

Winter 2002, Issue 8

Hamid - Free after 3 years

The group first came into contact with Hamid from Morocco in September 1999 and Anne Parsons (Reigate) was allocated as his visitor. She did not know then that it would be over 3 years before Hamid would be released from immigration detention.

Hamid is a special person. Not merely because his detention was one of the longest ever seen in this country but because he has, amazingly, remained sane. His detention lasted from 30th July 1999 until 6th September 2002.

Hamid claimed asylum in July 1999 and we met at Tinsley House that September. A few months later he celebrated his 21st birthday. At that time Hamid spoke no English so, with the help of various detainees translating, we struggled. These were difficult times; now and again the translators would become bored or distracted and I would receive their version of Hamid's words! Meanwhile Hamid attended English classes until, eventually and haltingly, we felt we could converse privately.

Apart from holidays, I visited Hamid each week and became amazed at his courage, endurance and his willingness to go through any court in the land if it would assist in his request for asylum. As a Muslim, Hamid's main consolation and support came from his prayer life and each year he fasted through Ramadan. He continued with his English classes and found the gym and football helpful. Sometimes I felt that he was giving me support! He had many anxieties during his stay at Tinsley House – his father's death being one of them. At one point the stress became too much and he went on hunger strike for 4 days.

In the first quarter of 2001, Rachel Crellin, a BBC journalist, made a documentary at Tinsley House. She spent many weeks there and interviewed Hamid, among others. She made a very moving film about detainees and those returning to their own country. *(This is available to borrow from the office)*

Around April 2001, the system at Tinsley House was changing and all the long-stayers were sent to other centres or prisons. So after 1 year and 10 months at Tinsley, Hamid was sent to Rochester Prison. I continued to visit (my husband as chauffeur – having no sense of direction myself!) but, due to the distance, only every few weeks. To keep in touch, he rang me periodically. Being banged up in a cell for 20 hours or more out of the day was very hard to take after the more relaxed regime of Tinsley House. During this time he went on hunger strike for 7 days.

After many court hearings, he went to Bromley Magistrates Court on 5th February 2001 and on his return to Rochester was allegedly assaulted by prison officers. On 17th December 2001, he went to yet another bail hearing after which he was moved to Harmondsworth Detention Centre. After 8 months there, he was finally released on 6th September 2002. He is now taking Rochester Prison to court for the alleged assault and is free until the case comes to court – this could take about a year. He has to report each week to the police station, but otherwise is having a taste of freedom. I still see him occasionally and we keep in touch.

Anne Parsons

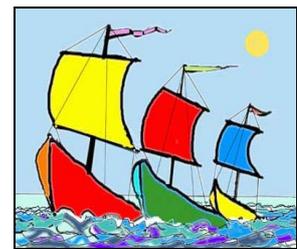
★ Xmas Cards 2002 ★

Last year our sale of Christmas cards raised over £750 for the group. Don't miss out this year and order yours!

If you are able to help us on a sale or return basis even better. This is a great way of increasing awareness of asylum seekers in detention and promoting our work.



'Angel Fanfare'



'I saw three ships'

To order, contact Mary Lean
01883 712856

Office News

- We are in the process of planning a **website**. We hope that will promote our work amongst the general public and potential funders but we also want it to be a useful resource for visitors and a point of contact for ex-detainees. All offers of technical or creative support very welcome!
- Our **detainee information leaflet** has been translated into a further 3 languages (**Swahili, Czech and Turkish**). We now have the leaflet displayed at Tinsley House in 18 languages. Thank you to visitor Simon Ndazi for translating the Swahili version.
- **BID have written a notebook for detainees** explaining bail procedures and giving advice on how to prepare your own bail application. They are currently piloting the scheme at Harmondsworth, with a view to making it available at other detention centres in November.
- Our **free phone number** continues to be an important point of contact for new referrals and for existing detainees. We are finding that not all detainees are comfortable leaving a message on the answerphone that picks up the calls. If you give out the number (**0800 389 7367**) please explain to people to leave their name and room number and we will call them back as soon as possible.
- Welcome to our **8 new visitors** Anne-Marie Lombard (Brighton) Mohammed Nabi Hashemi (Crawley), Debbie Griffiths (Brighton), Emily Cochrane (Brighton), Beryl Payne (Brighton), Celia Newbury (Horsham), David Newbury (Horsham), Marilyn Bell (Crawley). Sad goodbye and thanks to Sue Hipperson who is moving to France.

VISITING SUICIDAL DETAINEES

Suicide Awareness Training for Visitors *with Maeve Crowley*

This September, we were pleased to welcome consultant clinical psychologist, Maeve Crowley, to give a training session for visitors on Suicide Awareness. Visitors began by expressing their concerns about dealing with suicidal detainees:

- What should we say to detainees expressing suicidal thoughts?
- What are the real indicators that someone is serious and not just feeling low?
- What should we do? Who should we tell? How can we cope with our own reactions?

Risk Factors

Detainees at Tinsley House are a high-risk suicide population: many are isolated in this country, traumatised, depressed, with no control over their immediate future. It is hard to give firm indicators to determine if someone is seriously suicidal, as many of the symptoms are similar to those of depression and Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). It is important to look for a constellation of factors – rather than an isolated expression of suicidal intent. The fact that someone tells you of such thoughts may be a powerful symbolic representation of how distressed they are feeling. Some signs to look out for:

- Withdrawal from the company of others
- Self-neglect
- Refraining from activities and association with others
- Marked change of character
- Lack of motivation about planning for the future
- Tidying up one's affairs, such as giving possessions away
- Concrete plans on how to carry out suicide
- History of suicide attempts
- Psychotic behaviour (hearing voices, etc)

Be reassured that you will not be the only person looking out for these symptoms. Staff at Tinsley House are trained in suicide awareness.

Triggers

Research done of suicide attempts in prisons indicates that certain events can trigger suicidal or para-suicidal behaviour (i.e. risk-taking behaviour or self-harm): stressful court appearances, anniversaries, transfers to other institutions, disciplinary hearings and expected visits that don't take place.

What can we say?

It's hard to suggest things out of context but here are a few thoughts:

- It is important that the detainee feels that you are taking them seriously. Try not to say things like *'things can't be that bad'*, as a typical response would be for that person to then give lots of reasons why things *are* bad.
- Imagine what you would like to hear if this were you.
- Validate a person's feelings by affirming *'I can understand how you would feel that.'*
- You could show that you care and are taking them seriously by statements such as *'what you say to me shows me how you really feel'* or *'I realise now how bad you feel.'*
- It can be our instinct to say *'please don't do that'*. On the one hand this demonstrates to someone that you care and it would matter to you if they harmed themselves. However, be careful not to place additional pressure on a detainee.
- Language problems may arise; if so use short sentences, such as *'I understand'*. Even if your every word is not understood, the way you say things will transmit your intention.

What can we do?

- **Inform the office of your concerns.** We will then contact the psychology team and medical centre. Under normal circumstances,

everything a detainee tells us remains within the group, but if it were felt that a detainee was a risk to himself or others, then we would break our confidentiality.

- **Be non-judgmental, non-threatening and empathetic** – allowing people to talk openly and freely. You can help by listening and bearing witness to a detainee's suffering, letting them know you care and they are not alone.
- **Encourage their involvement in activities** – so as not to withdraw into themselves.
- With the detainee, come up with a **step by step plan** for when they are feeling suicidal. Ask them to write down who they would contact first, including that person's contact details. If that person isn't there, who would they contact next – and so on and so forth. (For example, they could find an officer they relate well to, speak to the nurse, religious staff or call our office.)
- **Practical assistance such as calling solicitors or family members.** By modelling the activity that they would do if feeling well, you are again emphasising that you are together with them and keeping them connected with reality.
- When people are expressing difficulty dealing with the future, then it might help to talk about the past. For example, **looking at ways in which they have been strong before**, can help people become sturdier now.

Support for Visitors

- Please do not feel that you have to hold what you are hearing yourself. **Share feelings at local group support meetings** and talk to family and friends. You are encouraging a detainee to access social support, so do the same for yourself.
- **Talk to us at the office or call your area group Co-ordinator** – we are here to advise and support you. If you wish, we can arrange for you to visit with another visitor or with one of the office staff to support you.
- **Don't feel insecure about your abilities.** Maeve likened being a visitor to being a parent, where you feel that you can never be quite good enough! Reflect on how the detainee you are visiting would be without your support and remember that there are things that you can have no control over.
- If religious/spiritual beliefs are important to you – remember you are not God's last chance!
- What can be a disempowering process for us, can be empowering for a detainee. **Maeve reminded us that we do bring about change for people, even though we can often feel powerless.**

Pascale Noel

Suicidal thoughts can be expressions of psychological states such as depression and PTSD. The fact that someone tells you of these thoughts is not necessarily a statement of their intent but one that we must take seriously and responsibly none the less.

My name is Lansana.

I am currently housed at the Tinsley House detention centre. I am an asylum seeker. I entered UK illegally via France in the back of a lorry aided by an agent. I was detained when I went to sign on as do all illegal entrants. I did not hear anything from immigration about my present status until 5 pm today, when I was handed a document indicating my removal. In principle I do not object to leave the UK. But there is clear and imminent threat on my life should I be returned to Sierra Leone. This, the adjudicator agreed with at my appeal.

As a man that went to law school, the trial was a farce. It seemed every one in the immigration community is against asylum seekers more so when there are of course 'bogus asylum seekers'. Also the press and the far right have poisoned the decent people of this country with lies and bad pictures painted about asylum seekers. The government in turn panicked and now have embarked on wholesale removal. In this panic, the asylum appeal tribunals have erred on cases, failed to observe correct legal

proceedings, ignored vital evidences and submissions, ignored human right laws and protection. In the process, asylum seekers have been denied basic rights and messed about with reckless abandon. Back in Africa I studied a bit of English law and

‘A man
cannot be
running
from a
burning
car, then
you rescue
him only to
shut him in

it must. Wholesale expulsion is not the answer and will not deter others, both genuine and bogus. My hat goes off to Lord Justice Wolfe for condemning the government in the way they ignore European Human Rights directives. The legal system cannot and should not be politicised especially in panic or to make a point.

democracy based on the English system. But I see asylum seekers' rights being trampled upon with impunity because the government wants to send a strong message that 'Britain is no soft touch.' Good, but let the legal system work, and work well

Back to me. Because there is a threat on my life if I go back to Sierra Leone, I want first of all to have a Judicial Review on my case and if that fails, I want to be given the opportunity to leave the UK and go to an African country of my choice. A man cannot be running from a burning car, then you rescue him only to shut him in the boot.

What hurts is the fact that the wicked criminal has more right, dignity and respect than the asylum seeker – for the crime (if you can call it so) of fleeing persecution. I was locked up in Sierra Leone and neighbouring Guinea and on both occasions narrowly escaped summary execution. Now I am locked up in the UK, supposedly a civilised and democratic state – or is it a case of the pot calling Robert Mugabe names!

Injustices happen all over the world and they do indeed take different shapes and forms. But they all have one thing in common, the innocent, helpless, defenceless fall victim. I think I need to talk to you guys.

Lansana

THIRD COUNTRY INFORMATION PACKS

Many detainees we visit face removal to another European country, under the 1990 Dublin Convention. This means that the first European Union country that an asylum seeker (officially) enters holds responsibility for the asylum claim. In other words, if they were recorded as having come through another European Union country – a 'safe third country', according to the Dublin Convention – before arriving in the UK, they can be sent back there.

If this all seems rather complicated, it is easily to imagine how bewildering it must seem to the people concerned. **What does my solicitor mean by 'Third Country Case'? What is the 'Dublin Convention'? Why am I being sent to this other country, and what will happen to me there?** The problem is compounded by the fact that they may have no friends or family there, may not speak the language or – as is often the case – are afraid that this 'third country' will return them directly to their homeland.

In response to this problem, which visitors have often pointed out to us, I am writing **information packs** that can be given to people before they leave, along with a small **phrasebook** (aren't Pound Shops great?!). The idea is to have a pack for the most common third country cases, containing information about:

1. **Why they are being sent to another country**
2. **The country's asylum system**
3. **Arriving there, and what to expect**
4. **Some useful words and sentences** (in addition to the phrasebook)
5. **Organisations providing support and legal advice**

Writing these packs is challenging. *How* to get the right balance between providing useful information that will help people to feel more prepared – *without* alarming them further – and avoid the use of yet more 'legal jargon', using an English that is accessible to as many people as possible? It may therefore be **some time before the final version of each pack is ready**, especially since work on this relies on things in the office being relatively quiet – which isn't often!

Nevertheless, draft versions of the Austria, Germany and Netherlands packs are now ready. I have also started research on other third countries, so do let me know if the person you're visiting needs any information. Finally, I would of course welcome any suggestions or comments on how to make the packs as useful as possible.

At the removal centre (for Songul and Brahima)

*Your life's unlucky, so you say.
I visit from a happier sphere.
My life is pretty much OK.*

*You weep because you cannot stay,
They'll send you home to all you fear -
Your life's unlucky, so you say.*

*I only wish I knew a way
To help, to make my country hear.
My life is pretty much OK.*

*Your hopes and dreams in disarray,
You're torn away from all that's dear.
Your life's unlucky, so you say.*

*It's not so much for which you pray -
The right to live in safety here.
My life is pretty much OK.*

*I've got to leave you for today -
My world is waiting, safe and near.
Your life's unlucky, as you say,
While mine is pretty much OK.*

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Thank you!

Recently we went to visit our clothing store based at The Friary in Crawley, where we met volunteers **Michael and David Earle**. Every week, we fax a list of clothing requests from detainees to the store's co-ordinator **Larry Connors**. Larry has been helping us for several years and is invaluable – as we do not have the space or time in the office to provide a proper service ourselves.

Michael (18) started volunteering 2 years ago, with friends from school. He found out about Tinsley House from a trainee priest at The Friary, who set up the store. His brother Daniel (16) has been helping for 18 months. Thank yous from detainees are a constant reminder of how valuable their dedication and commitment is. **As more and more people arrive at Tinsley House in just the clothes they are wearing, we really could not do without them.**

Michael and David sorting clothes

THE CLOTHES STORE NEEDS:

- ◆ Men's clothing
- ◆ Shoes
- ◆ Winter wear
- ◆ T-shirts and casuals

Please call us at the office if you are able to help!

What is AVID doing for us?

(The Association of Visitors to Immigration Detainees)



Through ARC (Asylum Rights Campaign) we are:

- Pressing for changes in the current legislation
- Pressing for the implementation of Part III of the 1999 Act which would give detainees automatic bail hearings
- Pressing for reinstatement of the right to work for asylum seekers after 6 months
- Pressing for an independent body to do in-country research

Through the ARC Detention sub-group we are:

- Helping to collect statistics to challenge the Home Office on detention
- Pushing for welfare provision in detention centers
- Responding to requests for information from the United Nations Special Rapporteur
- Supporting the report by BID on arbitrary detention by gathering information

Through our own organization we are:

- Advocating on behalf of those who have not yet received compensation after the Yarl's Wood fire
- Supporting BID's new DIY Notebook for detainees to mount their own bail applications
- Monitoring the differences between Removal Centres and pressing for the highest standards across the detention estate.
- Offering new training modules
- Consulting on operating standards
- When published, we will press for the implementation of the recommendations by HMIP at all the Removal Centres which have been visited through the Detention User Group

What will happen in the future?

The detention estate has shrunk dramatically due to Yarl's Wood being out of action and Harmondsworth numbers being reduced to 220 while sprinklers are installed.

- **We are concerned about the detention of women, children and in particular, pregnant women.**
- **Accommodation centres may need visiting groups as they are sited outside towns and villages**
- We will continue to press for interpreters for all sensitive meetings/consultations
- **We will push for better medical care for all detainees in Removal Centres**

Helen Ireland (Asst. Co-ordinator AVID)

GDWG supports the aims of AVID and we are also an active member of the Asylum Rights Campaign detention sub-group.

Prison Visiting

As well as visiting detainees in Tinsley House, I also visit an inmate in a prison, a middle-aged woman whose family is in Germany. So you can imagine the similarity between visiting her and visiting a detainee. My visits are the inmate's only ones save for the visits from her daughter once or twice a year. Once again, the visitor is someone who says, in effect, 'You're not forgotten. I'm interested in you, I care about you.' And that interest has been rewarded, I can tell you. The inmate is companionable; in fact, she's great company for the hour or so that we talk to each other. She is a skilled teddy-bear maker, and we talk about her work in the prison workshops. Her English? She learned to speak the language whilst in prison. She tells me (with a smile) that when she returns home she will say that she 'learned to speak English when she was working in England'. As a Prison Visitor, I can visit her freely in the evening. I am not searched, and we meet on our own. Recently, GDWG visitor Christa Wilson came with me to visit during a Saturday afternoon. In preparation, the inmate had slept in rollers for three nights and she wore her best pink blouse. How about that?

Don Cooper (Oxted)

GDWG Bulletin

- **The Christmas Carol service at Tinsley House** is on the 17th December, you can ask the detainee you are visiting to invite you.
- There are some spaces for any visitors who have not been on a **tour of Tinsley House** on the following dates; 12th Nov 2.30 pm and 20th Nov 6pm. Contact office if interested.
- AVID are offering a course in **volunteer management** for any interested visitors. Contact the office for more information.
- **Upcoming Support Group Meetings:**
 - Oxted** November 26th @ Mary's 7.30 pm
 - Brighton** November 12th @ Crypt Church 7pm
 - Horsham** November 13th @ Joan Whitely's 7.45 pm
 - Reigate** 4th December @ Anne Locke's 7.30 pm
 - Crawley** to be confirmed