



# Gatwick Detainees Welfare Group Newsletter

Spring 2004, Issue 12

## Alleged assaults by escort staff

**The numbers of detainees telling us about verbal or physical assaults during attempted removal is of growing concern.**

We received four reports during January and February, and the London Detainee Support Group has been told of eight incidents in January alone. In 2003, the Home Affairs Select Committee on Asylum Removals looked at this issue, and we responded to their request for evidence by submitting incidents of mistreatment reported to us. Escort staff are not the same as those who work in the detention centres, and the alleged incidents are taking place in escort vans or at the airport, *not* at Tinsley House.

Detainees have alleged that escort officers have verbally abused them. Ahmed says he overheard one escort officer saying, 'we'll put him in a box, or break his arms and legs to make him go', another allegedly told him he was 'a piece of s\*\*t - go back to your country'. Daniel claims he was called a 'black monkey' and Abdul accused one officer of taunting him by claiming to be a member of the BNP. Joseph says he

was told he would be handcuffed and thrown into the sea.

**Others have made allegations of physical abuses.** In the case of one female detainee, her arm was badly hurt and on return to Tinsley House, she was hospitalised. Another detainee says he had to have ongoing medical treatment after pepper gas was sprayed in his eyes, someone else claims that an officer restrained and punched his pregnant wife. One detainee who was taken for removal - at a time when his solicitor was mid-appeal, but immigration had forgotten to cancel his removal directions - wrote:

'Six of the staffs [at the airport] who were on duty dragged and pulled me on the corridor and put my head on the floor forcefully while handcuffing. I did tell them not to bend my right leg, which was injured by a gunshot, while I was serving in the...army. But in return they screamed saying that they will shoot the other leg as well using the same filthy words and continued to hurt me. I was left lying on the floor and then after twenty minutes called an ambulance...It's hard to digest for me that this kind of activities happening in a tolerant country like UK.'

**In our experience, official complaints are rarely made by detainees - and if they are, seldom upheld.** Most detainees are scared to put in an official complaint, or have left the country before they have a chance to. There is no independent scrutiny of the removal process, which means that it is always the detainee's word against those of the officers. This also suggests a lack of protection for staff against unfounded complaints. Last year the Home Affairs Select Committee on Asylum Removals recommended that consideration be given to extending the role of the Independent Monitoring Boards (IMBs)

to cover removals, and this is currently in the pipeline. AVID are pushing for CCTV to be installed in escort vans, and they plan to set up a group of concerned organisations to work together in collecting evidence and campaigning. Please keep us informed of any incidents you hear of and encourage detainees to pursue an official complaint - contact the office immediately so we can advise you on possible courses of action.

**There is no doubt that there needs to be more independent scrutiny of the removals process. Not only to protect detainees, but also to defend security staff against unfounded complaints.**

*(Names in this article have been changed)*

Pascale Noel

## Funding secured!

We are very pleased to announce that the group has been successful in gaining an award from the **Community Fund** to cover staff salaries for the next three years.

**COMMUNITY FUND**

*Lottery money making a difference*



# Supporting Bisexual, Gay and Lesbian Asylum Seekers

Being persecuted due to your sexual orientation is grounds for asylum in the UK. In 1999, the House of Lords decided that lesbians and gay men who face such persecution constitute a 'social group' from which claims for asylum should be allowed. The Home Office has accepted this decision.

In reality however, such cases remain very difficult to win. If you come from a country where you've had to hide your sexuality, or been punished because of it, then 'I'm gay' is not likely to be the first thing you'll say to an immigration official in the UK – especially if you don't know this is grounds for asylum. However, if you don't say this straight away, this can seriously undermine the credibility of your case in the eyes of the Home Office.

Furthermore, a person claiming asylum on grounds of persecution due to sexual orientation may not fit the immigration official's idea of what a lesbian or gay person should be like. For example, you might be married to someone of the opposite sex, and have children. This may be because of the pressure to hide your sexuality, because of the pressure to get married and procreate, or because you are bisexual and/or wanted children. You may also not have had any or much experience of love or sexual relations with the same sex – not because you didn't want to, but because it was too dangerous or too scary.

Even if you do fit the stereotype of a gay man or lesbian, and do 'come out' immediately, it's still difficult to win cases on these grounds. But it is possible, and it has been done.

In 2003, GDWG volunteers supported five lesbian, gay or bisexual detainees. A detainee I visited turned out to be one of them. During my first visit he told me about an abusive relationship he had with another man, which was connected to his fleeing to the UK. I thought maybe he was straight and anti-gay due to this relationship, which did not seem to have been consensual. On the other hand, he might be attracted to men but not want to admit it. Not knowing

what to say, I listened without comment.

During my second visit, he discussed homosexuality as a perversion. I declared that I didn't think it was a perversion. This interested him, and he started to tell me how he was indeed attracted to men (as well as women). However, he also believes same sex sexual activities are a sin before God. Our conversations have since taken contradictory directions, from discussing the joys of men to him trying to convert me to Christianity and to homophobia, as well as of course many topics unconnected to sexuality.

*In 2003, GDWG supported five lesbian, gay or bisexual detainees... a detainee I visited turned out to be one of them*

The challenge for me has been to know when to be non-judgmental, and accept his god and his homophobia. (I haven't found it a challenge to be non-judgmental about his relations with men, because that all makes perfect sense to me.) I've found a balance in mainly listening, whilst letting him know where I stand (i.e. non-christian, pro-gay). The most difficult thing for me is unrelated to these issues, and is instead watching a person being broken down by our asylum system. However, through all this I have personally learnt a great deal, and I've also been able to find several sources of support for him and people in similar situations, which are outlined on the right. I'd be happy to talk with any other volunteers visiting bisexual, lesbian, or gay detainees. You can find me through the GDWG office, or on: [shuangxinglian@hotmail.com](mailto:shuangxinglian@hotmail.com)

Susie Jolly

## FACTS

> Same sex sexual activities for women are explicitly illegal in more than 40 states around the world.

> Same sex sexual activities for men are explicitly illegal in more than 80 states around the world.

> Lesbian, gay and bisexual people are officially subject to the death penalty in 9 countries around the world, in 3 of which executions have recently taken place.

Source: Jong 2003, 'Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender refugees and asylum seekers navigation guide', [www.icar.org.uk/pdf/ng006.pdf](http://www.icar.org.uk/pdf/ng006.pdf) (p.23)

## General information and support

- The Information Centre about Asylum Seekers and Refugees in the UK (ICAR) has produced a 'Navigation Guide' for lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) refugees and asylum seekers. This provides information and contact details of organisations which might be able to help, useful websites, etc. You can download this guide from:

[www.icar.org.uk/content/res/nav/ng006/ng006-01.html](http://www.icar.org.uk/content/res/nav/ng006/ng006-01.html)

- The Lesbian and Gay Immigration Group run an information line Mon-Fri, 12-5pm:  
Tel: 020 7734 3705

[www.stonewall-immigration.org.uk](http://www.stonewall-immigration.org.uk)

## Legal support

- The legal firm Wesley Gryk can provide a list of solicitors working in this area.

Tel: 020 7401 6887

- The Lesbian and Gay Immigration Group also provide a similar list. In addition to their information line (see General information and support), they provide a free legal advice helpline, run by volunteer solicitors, on Wednesday evenings from 6pm to 8pm:  
Tel: 020 7734 3705

## Information to help the case

- The International Gay and Lesbian Human Rights Commission can put together an information pack on the situation of LGBTs in particular countries:

[www.iglhrc.org/site/iglhrc](http://www.iglhrc.org/site/iglhrc)

Or contact Dusty Araujo (Coordinator, Asylum Documentation Program)

Tel: 1+415-561-0633 / Fax: 1+415-561-0619

Email: [asylum@iglhrc.org](mailto:asylum@iglhrc.org)

- Amnesty International: LGBT Network

[www.ai-lgbt.org](http://www.ai-lgbt.org)

- Amnesty UK: LGBT network

Tel: 020 7814 6200

[www.aiglbtc.co.uk/index.htm](http://www.aiglbtc.co.uk/index.htm)

- For thematic reports on sexual orientation:

<http://web.amnesty.org/library/eng-347/index>

- The Safra Country Information Research Project provide information on the situation in Muslim countries:

[www.safraproject.org](http://www.safraproject.org)

## Anti-deportation campaigns

- If a detainee wishes to publicly fight his removal, contact the National Coalition of Anti-Deportation Campaigners (NCADC) for advice:

Tel: 01215 546 947 (main office)

Email: [ncadc@ncadc.demon.co.uk](mailto:ncadc@ncadc.demon.co.uk)

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

The NCADC also have a list of gay organisations they can circulate.

## Support outside of detention

- The Lesbian and Gay Switchboard provides information about local support groups:

Tel: 020 7837 7324

A (non-exhaustive) list can be found at:

[www.galha.org](http://www.galha.org)

- Lesbian and Gay Immigration Group

- Lesbian and Gay Christians

Tel: 020 7739 1249

[www.lgcm.org.uk](http://www.lgcm.org.uk)

- LBT Muslim women (Safra Project)

Email: [info@safraproject.org](mailto:info@safraproject.org)

- Bisexual Muslims

<http://groups.yahoo.com/group/BiMuslims/>

- Albert Kennedy Trust – homeless lesbian and gay teenagers

[www.akt.org.uk](http://www.akt.org.uk)

## Shirley Bridges

Shirley joined the group three years ago, shortly after her return to the UK from Jordan, where she lived for 24 years. Shirley co-facilitates 'Divorce Recovery' workshops, is the Chair of the 'Broadfield Teddies' toddler group, and is currently helping to set up an Inter-Faith group for Crawley. In addition, she is part of Crawley Community Centre management committee where, as one of our GDWG speakers, she recently gave a talk about her experiences of visiting Tinsley House.



### How did you come to be a visitor with the group?

At the time, I was looking for a meaningful way in which to use my Arabic, and my sister, who has friends involved with the Haslar Visitors Group, suggested I visit immigration detainees at Tinsley House. I also felt drawn to this due to my own experience returning to the UK after many years abroad. The support from my family to overcome feelings of culture shock and isolation had been invaluable, and it occurred to me how difficult it must be for people who are detained and far from their loved ones.

### What has visiting detainees at Tinsley House been like?

When I first started visiting, I found it quite overwhelming. What I found particularly difficult were the security checks all visitors undergo to get into the visits room, and that line on the ground that demarcates where the visitor and the detainee are respectively allowed to sit. Since then, I've lost count of how many detainees I have visited. Most of them have been Algerian or from other Arab countries. I visited one Algerian man who made a T-shirt at the Arts and Craft afternoon [*run weekdays by Jenny, in Tinsley House*] that said 'Free me, Let me go!'.

### Sadly, after seeing him each

week for 8 months, he was sent back to Algeria. I think the most upsetting thing, though, was visiting a family. When I left the visits room I actually burst into tears.

### What do you think you have gained from your experience?

Through my involvement with other local organisations, I often meet people who have never even heard of Tinsley House, and this is why I decided to become one of GDWG's official speakers. After the interest that arose from my first talk at the Community Centre, I hope to continue to raise awareness about detainees in the local area, and plan to give talks to other organisations and in schools. I feel deeply committed to my role as a visitor to detainees, so in that respect I guess it has given me a strong sense of purpose. I know that I can't change the law or a detainee's particular situation, but the very fact of reaching out to someone who is in distress, isolated and often powerless can help, if only in a small way. Quite simply, visiting is part of who I am.

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## DETENTION AND BEYOND

Beryl Payne, GDWG visitor and member of the Brighton Amnesty group, invited three former detainees to give a talk at Amnesty's March meeting about their experiences of asylum and detention.

**Abdul**, a member of the opposition party in Guinea, arrived in England in 1998, where he met a Congolese woman to whom he is now married with two children. Last year, he was unexpectedly picked up whilst reporting at the Home Office, and not given permission by immigration to call his wife until the evening. Early the following morning, he was taken to be deported. His wife rushed to the airport with their children and thankfully his flight was cancelled. And so began a four-month period of detention – in Tinsley, Campsfield, Dover and Harmondsworth, meaning at times it was difficult for his family to visit. Abdul told the Amnesty meeting that on numerous occasions he was given removal directions, only for them to be cancelled at the last minute. He has now been released but his asylum case remains unresolved. One day, when his party is in power, he plans to return to Guinea voluntarily, as a minister in the new government. He wonders how he will treat the one million refugees resident in Guinea when he returns.

**Claude**, a musician, claimed asylum after writing a song in support of the opposition party in the Ivory Coast. Like Abdul, since being in the UK, he has married and had children. Last year he spent two months in Brixton prison, for entering the UK illegally. This was followed by a stretch in Harmondsworth. His wife also had a difficult year. Whilst seven months pregnant, she was picked up and taken for removal without him, and spent time in Yarls Wood detention centre. Although now released, she remains traumatised by these experiences – and is nervous when she hears car doors slamming outside their home at night.

These stories tell a wider picture, of the break-up of family life; of living with the constant threat of re-detention and removal; the administrative incompetence of immigration; and the difficulties faced by detainees' partners and children. They talk of the stresses of immigration detention, of becoming 'tired mentally' and the restrictions on being able to help yourself.

**Youssouf** came to the UK after becoming involved in student politics in the Ivory Coast. His first appeal hearing took place last year and although immigration did not turn up for the hearing, it went ahead regardless. The first that Youssouf heard of the result was when he went to routinely report and was given a refusal letter and told he was to be detained and deported. He spent eight months in detention, which was a difficult time, frustrated by lack of access to good legal advice. He illustrates this with the story of an Ivorian friend, whom he helped to find a new solicitor. When this solicitor turned up for the legal visit, he was quite open about the fact that he had never heard of the Ivory Coast, and did not even know that a civil war was taking place there. Youssouf was finally released and has recently been told by his solicitor that he has won his case. Despite this, he still receives letters from the Home Office threatening him with re-detention. This appears to be an administrative mistake, yet it is difficult for Youssouf to be understanding after all he's been through.

*The names of people in this article have been changed*

## GDWG News

### TRAINING

BID (Bail for Immigration Detainees) outreach officer Anna Jackson will be holding a session for visitors covering issues relating to applying for bail and how to use the new BID notebook: 6<sup>th</sup> May at 6.30 pm (Three Bridges Free Church).

Dates for the next regular GDWG training sessions will be available soon.

### INSLEY HOUSE

Tinsley House Operations Manager, Dave Hill, met with us recently. He informed us that Wackenhut's contract to run the centre expires this Spring; they have put in a new tender and are currently the preferred bidder. In their submissions, they have said they will provide computer training for detainees and a new pager system to replace the tannoy for alerting detainees about incoming telephone calls.

A box for complaints to the Independent Monitoring Board (IMB – formerly the Visiting Committee) is now in place. There is also another box for complaints to the Centre Manager, which is checked daily. Detainees wanting to complain can ask an officer for a complaint form and envelope.

We met the new Tinsley House Charge Nurse, Nigel Wade, in March. As of May, there will be 24-hour staff cover of the Medical Centre. Visitors' concerns should be passed on via the GDWG office.

### VOLUNTEERS

Thanks to Pam Spence for agreeing to take over from Jacqueline Clark as the new Horsham area co-ordinator.



## Clothing Chaos!

As the numbers of detainees in contact with us has risen, so has the demand for clothes and toiletries. It is becoming very difficult to cope with this high demand. It's not that we don't receive enough donations – on the contrary, we continue to be amazed by people's generosity. Rather, the problem is how to manage all these donations, and ensure that requests reach detainees in time.

**Delivery to Tinsley House:** We are extremely grateful to Larry of the Friary Church in Crawley, who runs our clothes store and makes a clothes delivery on Wednesdays. Special thanks also to volunteer Nigel, who drops by the office every Friday to take things to the centre. However, with up to 25 requests for clothes and toiletries each week, twice-weekly deliveries are simply not enough, especially to reach people who are about to be removed.

**Lack of storage space:** Most donations are stored in the office. To say that the storage space is inadequate is an understatement, as those who have visited the office just after a large clothes donation has arrived can testify!

**Lack of time:** As the request for toiletries and clothes has increased, so have urgent needs for help in finding solicitors, sign-posting advice organisations, liaising with other organisations, etc. Because of this, Pascale and Lys are struggling to find the time to sort through bags of clothes when they are donated to us.

### **Ways in which we need help**

- ⇒ **Clothes donations:** If you are donating clothes to the group, please take the time to go through them first, making sure that they are clean, appropriate and in good condition, and separating them into men's and women's clothing. Other clear labelling systems would also be helpful (summer/winter; bottoms/tops).
- ⇒ **Ideas welcome:** We are exploring ways in which to address our lack of storage space. Ideas so far are to rent a room elsewhere or to invest in larger, more efficient cupboards or storage boxes. We would welcome any suggestions or offers of assistance in this.
- ⇒ **Volunteer help:** We need more volunteers who are able to make a regular delivery to Tinsley House. Ultimately, we would really like to have a group of volunteers who would manage and sort the clothes. Please contact the office if you feel brave enough to take this on!

## Asylum News

**Section 55** In January 2003, the Section '55 ruling' came into force, leaving destitute many asylum seekers who did not claim asylum as soon as they entered the country. There are ongoing campaigns to put an end to the draconian policy, and in January Lys spent a cold night sleeping out in Trafalgar Square in solidarity with homeless asylum seekers. The Refugee Council has produced a report 'Section 55 – one year on'. See their website: [www.refugeecouncil.org.uk](http://www.refugeecouncil.org.uk)

**The Bill** As we write, the controversial Asylum Bill is working its way through Parliament. We were relieved to hear in March that the government has abandoned plans to deny failed asylum-seekers the right of appeal to the higher courts. However, there are a number of measures contained in the bill that remain of concern to groups working with asylum seekers, and it is hoped that further concessions will be made following its reading in the House of Lords. *The situation is always changing – if you would like to keep up to date with this and other news relating to asylum seekers and refugees, social worker Frank Corrigan provides an excellent daily email service of news and information. See box.*

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