

Gatwick Detainees Welfare Group Newsletter

Summer 2004, Issue 13

GDWG News

New contract to run Tinsley House

Wackenhut, the private security company running Tinsley House, has now been taken over by Global Solutions Limited (GSL), a subsidiary of Group 4. On the ground, staff and management stay the same. The new contract to run the centre includes some significant changes, such as the move to a pager system for receiving incoming telephone calls. Other changes – to be introduced over the coming months – will include the provision of deodorant and shaving sticks, a £5 shop voucher to replace the statutory phonecard given to destitute detainees each week, and more clothing.

Clothing update

Tinsley House is now required to provide destitute detainees (who only have the clothes they're wearing) with a spare set of clothing. They can ask at the Control area for a new t-shirt and tracksuit, two pairs of pants and socks. Although in its infancy, the system appears to be working, but do keep us informed of any problems. This has of course meant that some of our burden of providing clothing has been lifted, and we are no longer in need of large clothing donations. However, we will continue to run a limited weekly clothes service for long-term detainees.

New GDWG volunteers

Welcome to our new volunteers **Kate Crook** - who also helps in the office one day a week - **Edson de Lima, Sarah Dickson, Jana Edmunds** (Brighton), and **Calitas Matora** (Crawley) – who between them speak fluent Spanish, French, Portuguese, Russian, Shona and Ndebele.

We are currently looking for more visitors in the Horsham, Oxted and Reigate support groups. If you know anyone who may be interested please pass this on.

GDWG statistics

We have assisted over 500 detainees so far this year. 48 of these experienced serious welfare problems due to detention, for example separation from family members or loss of belongings. 16 detainees in contact with us have alleged being assaulted by escort staff when taken for removal.

The Trouble with Detention Disturbances in Harmondsworth

*'Our dearest people,
We the detainees of the C wing in Harmondsworth are writing to you people outside the Detention Centre to inform you about our life and the terrible conditions we are living in, the pressure and the mental torture that Immigration Service is putting on us.... From the managers to the senior officers to the Detention Custody Officers none of these people respect us or consider us as human beings. Anybody who works here can cause a decision of detainees being sent to the isolation or segregation unit for no reason.'*

These are the opening lines of a letter sent to us by Amadou, from Senegal, who was transferred from Tinsley House to Harmondsworth Detention Centre in March. The letter reached us just a few days before the riot that took place there on 20 July 2004, after a man was found hanged in his room.

Where to now for Harmondsworth Detainees?

Although the riot culminated in a seven-hour stand-off in an exercise yard between a group of 80 detainees and security forces, by the end of the day all 441 detainees were being moved out of Harmondsworth to other locations – including high security prisons. Since then, GDWG has been trying to establish the whereabouts of those detainees who were previously in Tinsley House and in contact with the group.

So far, we have found out that one man – who has been detained for over two years now – was transferred to Campsfield Detention Centre, whilst another – a former client of the Medical Foundation for the Care of Victims of Torture – was moved to Lincoln Prison. Amadou, meanwhile, was sent to High Down Prison. We haven't been able to speak to him, but have been told that immigration plan to deport him back to Senegal. Ironically, he has been fighting to be sent back to his country since first being detained over a year ago.

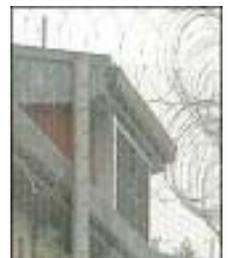
An incident waiting to happen?

On the day of the disturbances, a number of Home Office officials and Harmondsworth representatives lined up to point out the substantial improvements made in the centre in recent months. The centre's Sikh chaplain, Karamjit Khehra, went so far as to describe the centre's facilities as *'very nice'*, adding that: *'If you go inside, it looks like a hotel, not a prison.'*

Yet only eight months ago, Anne Owers, the Inspector of Prisons, wrote a scathing report on the centre, describing it as *'failing to provide a safe and stable environment'*, with an average of one self-harm incident a week, and a lack of proper mental health support for detainees. Significantly, the report stressed that there was *'no means of locking down the centre in the event of concerted indiscipline'*. Earlier this year, the Metropolitan Police arrested and interviewed five members of staff following an allegation that a Harmondsworth detainee had been assaulted. In May, 220 detainees launched a five-day hunger strike.

Throughout his time in Harmondsworth, Amadou was extremely active in writing letters about the conditions in detention, contacting Amnesty International in Brighton, his MP and the national press amongst others, and becoming something of a spokesperson for his fellow detainees in the process. In one letter, written at the time of the Harmondsworth hunger strike, he wrote:

'I have no fear or shame about struggling for my right and the right of other people.... In the human being matter there is no first or second class of human being. No matter where we come from, we should be treated equally because we are also human. Help us to stop this new kind of slavery.... Because most of us can't defend ourselves because we don't know our rights.'





A Music Group for Tinsley House by Katherine Mann

'I believe that music can build bridges, not only between different ethnic groups but also between different cultural backgrounds - music can bring people together'

(Chartwell Dutiro, mbira-player, refugee from Zimbabwe and UNHCR Freedom Soldier)

During the past year, I have been in the process of setting up musical activities for Tinsley house detainees. Having been a GDWG visitor for some time and a musician for as long as I can remember, I thought it was about time I pulled these interests together in a worthwhile way. During my time with GDWG, I have seen how likely detainees are to be traumatised and possibly depressed because of both their past and their present experiences. Many seem to find trusting others and expressing themselves difficult, whether due to anxieties associated with official questioning, a lack of common language, difficulties associated with reliving traumatic experiences, or other causes. Engaging in musical activities, I hoped, might allow detainees to express themselves, to connect with other detainees regardless of background or language, and hopefully to have some fun.

Following the initial idea, we were unsure how receptive the management at Tinsley would be. However, after a meeting with them, the idea has got off the ground and we've not looked back! In this subsequent period, I have been in regular contact with the Operations Manager at Tinsley House - who has been very enthusiastic himself about the idea - and am currently in the process of gaining security clearance for access beyond the visits room.

I hope to start up weekly music sessions for detainees this coming autumn. Sessions will take place within Tinsley House, in a room designated for the purpose. I hope to spend this time facilitating musical groupwork, either singing or playing musical instruments that I will provide and store at Tinsley House. I have been building up a collection of instruments for the group, but still need many more, so...



If anyone has any musical instruments they no longer use and would like to donate to the Tinsley music project, please get in touch!

Also, if anyone has any other ideas or comments, it would be great to hear from you - especially any budding music group facilitators! My email address is mankatherine@hotmail.com



Human Rights & Refugee Protection

In July the British Institute of Human Rights (BIHR) ran a day's training course for the group's volunteers on human rights legislation relating to asylum and immigration.



The Universal Declaration of Human Rights was passed by the United Nations in 1948, in response to the events of the second world war. Two years later the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR) was ratified. Pursuing a case on these grounds used to mean going to the European Court of Human Rights in Strasbourg, which was costly and time consuming. However, in October 2000 the ECHR was incorporated as part of UK law, which means that cases can be pursued in our domestic courts. All decisions made by the state in relation to asylum must be taken within the framework of convention rights. Some of the most used and relevant are:

Article 3

No one shall be subjected to torture or to inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment

This is an absolute right that cannot be interfered with by the state. Torture is the most serious and is defined as 'deliberate inhuman treatment, causing serious and cruel suffering'. Article 3 can provide protection against expulsion to a country where such harm would be faced but it must be proven that the treatment is a real risk rather than a possibility. This article was used to challenge Section 55 of the Nationality, Immigration and Asylum Act, whereby asylum seekers were being denied basic support if they did not claim asylum immediately on arrival in the UK. It has also been used to challenge the removal of people with serious medical conditions such as HIV/AIDS. However, the threshold of such cases is high, with the existence of family ties in UK, support available in receiving states and the stage of the illness all taken into account.

Article 8

Everyone has the right to respect for his private and family life, his home and his correspondence

This is a qualified right, which means that the state can interfere with it in order to protect the rights of other individuals or the public interest. The most relevant interest

here is 'family life'. In order to qualify as a breach, it must be demonstrated that family life was already being enjoyed. It can apply to unmarried partners as well as married ones. Considerations such as the length of the relationship, the stability of the partnership, the couples' future intentions and whether or not they have children will be taken into account. In cases where one family member is due to be removed, the human rights of the other family members are also relevant.

Article 5

Everyone has the right to liberty and security of person

The ECHR defined the deprivation of liberty as permissible in the following circumstances: (a) it should pursue a legitimate purpose, (b) should not be arbitrary, (c) should be proportionate and not unduly prolonged. It is legitimate to detain in order to prevent unauthorised entry into the UK and when actions are being taken to effect removal but 'Everyone who is deprived of his liberty by arrest or detention shall be entitled to take proceedings by which the lawfulness of his detention shall be decided speedily by a Court and his release ordered if the detention is not lawful.'

Training notes from the day available on request.

TINSLEY HOUSE IMB

We recently met with Jo Ashton, new chairperson of the Tinsley House Independent Monitoring Board (IMB). This was an opportunity to find out more about the statutory obligations of the board, and discuss the ways in which we can work together.

The role of the IMB

IMB visits are unannounced and occur several times a week. Members have access to all parts of the centre and are identifiable by their distinctive armband. Their duties are to hear complaints from detainees and staff members, and to feed back to the centre management, contract monitor and/or Home Office if the Detention Centre Rules are not being upheld. They also have a responsibility to visit detainees held in segregation.

The complaints system

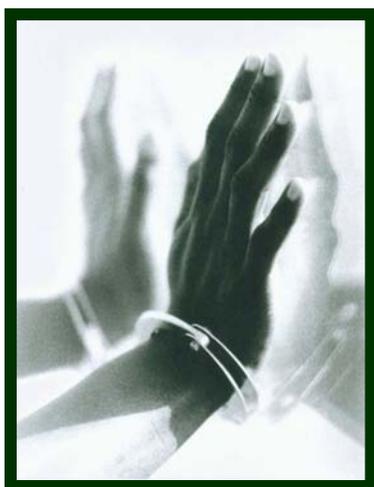
The IMB receive about four complaints each week from detainees – most commonly about racist incidents, food and medical care. Detainees wanting to complain to the board concerning their treatment within the centre have two options: They can approach an IMB member in person or, alternatively, there is a confidential locked box in which detainees can submit a written complaint.

Areas of concern

Jo highlighted a number of priority areas currently being addressed. These include improving access to legal advice lines and solicitors, pressing for internet availability and access to interpreters and ensuring that profits from the shop are spent on detainees' welfare.

We're delighted that former GDWG visitor, Geoff Beuret, has been successfully appointed to the board. If visitors have any concerns that they would like to address to the IMB, please direct these through Pascale.

Life in Detention – in photos



Photojournalist, Isabelle Merminod, will be providing images for a roving exhibition about the group's work. Her photos will also be used on our website. Isabelle is a photojournalist with a special interest in detention and imprisonment, and has been documenting the experiences in UK of detainees and former detainees for over ten years. She has also worked in Chile in the human rights field and produced a thesis and a slide-show on political prisoners in that country.

Anyone interested in her work can contact her by email: isabellemerminod@hotmail.com

TALKING TO BRIGHTON VISITOR EMMA DUNSTAN

Since joining GDWG in 2003, Emma has visited eight detainees from Afghanistan, Somalia, Angola, Senegal, Rwanda, Egypt and Liberia.

What led to your decision to visit detainees?

I was drawn to visiting immigration detainees because the idea of detaining people who are seeking a better, safer life for themselves seemed unnecessary and heartless to me. I felt that here was a group of people who had suffered enough in life, without now having to cope with the stress of detention.

What were your first few visits to Tinsley House like?

At first, I was very aware of the rules and restrictions of Tinsley House, and struggled to understand the point and purpose of some of them. I also remember feeling slightly apprehensive, wondering what I would find to talk about. However, it was a real pleasure to be meeting detainees and people were so grateful to have a visit. I discovered a real admiration for the people I met; their resilience and spirit is incredible and touching.

How has your experience of visiting been so far?

Visiting is such a simple thing to do, yet I have seen how much it is valued by the person you visit. I recently started visiting a new person at Tinsley House and after we had been chatting for a while, I saw him visibly relax; he smiled and said to me that he felt he had family again. These are the best times when you know that someone feels supported. There are hard times too. I visited a young woman from Rwanda. She hardly spoke or made eye contact. Once I asked her what she thought about and she replied that she wondered why she had ever been born, as all her life seemed to be about suffering. She was being returned to Rwanda, where she had not lived for years, where she knew no one, and from where she obviously had some terrible memories. She was due to arrive at 2 am, and had nowhere to stay or any money. I felt that even if her life was not in danger, it was cruel to send her to a place that held great pain for her, where she may have been very vulnerable.

You went to Harmondsworth to visit someone you had been seeing in Tinsley. What was that like?

Having visited Harmondsworth, it makes me appreciate the good points about Tinsley House. There is no signposting there, so the first time you visit, it's a matter of trial and error to find your way. Once inside, you are photographed and fingerprinted – for what purpose, I don't know. You then go through to the main building and get fingerprinted again, then pass through a metal detector and have a body search. Next you pass through a series of sliding doors. Once in the visits room you are finger-printed yet again, before finally getting to sit down and wait to see the person you came to visit. I found the atmosphere oppressive and claustrophobic, and it's no surprise that a riot took place there.

Welfare

Long Awaited Report Published

Welfare problems seem to go hand in hand with immigration detention. All too frequently, visitors hear accounts of people detained without their belongings; or detained far away from friends and family; not able to access their bank account or close their financial affairs before removal.

For over two years we have been part of a working group campaigning for the Home Office to recognise these issues as a real problem for those held under their powers. We were encouraged when last year they announced that a report was being commissioned to establish if there was a problem.

This report, authored by Dr Carrie Pemberton (former Yarlswood chaplain), has now been published – and its recommendations reinforce our concerns. The fact that detainees are *'being driven relentlessly towards removal'* means that delivery of appropriate welfare services is problematic – unlike a prison or social services framework, which operates with the client at the heart of service delivery.

Recommendations include: banking facilities be made available; internet access be explored; electronic transfer of medical records between centres and community GPs; and lines of responsibility and accountability be strengthened in relation to separation of family members, housing problems and the management of goods.

The working group has requested a meeting with Brian Pollett, IND Director of Detention Services, to discuss how the Home Office plans to respond to the report's recommendations.



Award Nominations

We're pleased to announce that the group's volunteers have recently received important recognition for their work.

The Guardian Charity Awards

We have been shortlisted from an initial selection of 700 charities down to the last 30 under consideration. The final judging takes place in early August – fingers crossed.

The National Lottery Helping Hands Awards

Crawley CVS has nominated us for the 'Inspiration' award.

Thanks to all the group's volunteers and supporters!



Consulting detainees about what they need – please help!

Although we meet detainees and talk to them on the phone all the time, we cannot be sure that we are meeting all their needs unless we give them the chance to feed back information anonymously. Our recent grant from the Big Lottery Fund has provided funds for consultancy to help with this and to translate a questionnaire into 10 languages.

Last year we did a one-off pilot survey, but we feel it would be better in the future to do an ongoing study by giving a questionnaire to any detainee we are in touch with as soon as s/he is released. 20% of detainees we were in touch with in 2003 were released.

If a detainee you are visiting is released, please would you ask them if they would take part in this survey and if they would be kind enough to provide an address. Pascale will send them a questionnaire in the appropriate language with a prepaid envelope in which they can return it to the consultants who are helping with the survey.

Once again we really need your help with this. Some detainees will be released so suddenly we will not have the chance to ask for a phone number or an address, others will not want to give an address, others will have left that address before the questionnaire arrives, so it is going to be difficult to get a lot of responses.

I treasure the comments from the last survey, particularly this one which seems to encapsulate what we do: 'It was something to look forward to every week. Other detainees had their own problems but my visitor could give me all her attention and made me feel better.'

Please help if you can.

Felicity Dick – GDWG Chairperson



GDWG 10th ANNIVERSARY

GDWG will be ten years old in 2005

We are planning a celebration event in Crawley on 16th June 2005, to say thank you to all those who have been involved with the group over the years and to raise awareness of asylum and detention issues. We hope that our patrons, Shirley Williams and Lord Dholakia, will speak, as well as visitors and former detainees. **Please put the date in your diary!**

We also plan a publication to mark the event. This could include a review of our work and of asylum issues over the decade; possibly something from our patrons and other well-wishers; and contributions from visitors and detainees (experiences, reflections, poems, photos, recipes... whatever). The sooner we start work on this the better, so if you have something you would like to write or contribute, or know someone who does, please contact Lys at the office or Mary Lean (marylean@f2s).

Supported by

