



# Gatwick Detainees Welfare Group Newsletter

Spring 2005, Issue 15

## Battle for the headlines...

**I don't know about you, but I'm fed up with shouting at the TV and radio. My partner wearily reminds me 'they can't hear you!', as I launch my latest tirade at the politician electioneering on asylum issues. It's just that the TB infested, tax guzzling, bogus asylum seeking terrorist, so commonly portrayed in the media, doesn't tally with the people I speak to everyday at Tinsley House.**

Many of the people we meet have fled hardship and suffering in their countries of origin and often risked their lives to make it to the UK to be in safety. I felt sad that when speaking to a Libyan detainee the other day; he felt the need to tell me that he wasn't a 'benefits scrounger'. Another detainee I spoke to recently kept repeating that he wasn't 'bogus'. With the general election looming, the arguments are likely to become all the more feverish. As the battle for the headlines and votes begin, I wonder if those of us trying to say something positive about the issue can raise our voices above the din.

The major British refugee charities have just published a booklet, 'Tell it like it is: the truth about asylum – a pocket guide for the election'. As the Chief Executive of the Scottish Refugee Council says: 'Asylum will clearly be a key issue throughout the general election campaign. It is vital that the debate is based on the truth; not on the myths and prejudices that have created so much public concern over this issue. The pocket guide is not designed to advocate any particular platform or political view. It simply provides clear, verifiable facts and figures that help put the issue of asylum into its proper perspective.' The leaflet can be found on their internet site or from our office. It might be worth sending a copy to your MP and local journalists. And if you notice a poorly written article in a local newspaper, you could point the editor in the direction of the media ethics charity the Presswise Trust. Their website promotes best practice in media coverage of refugee and asylum issues ([www.presswise.org.uk](http://www.presswise.org.uk)).

For those wanting to engage in a more proactive campaign, the email network 'Mediawatch' circulates details of articles appearing in the press that are biased against refugees, and encourages members to write letters of complaint. More details are at: <http://groups.yahoo.com/group/mediawatch4refugees/>

But in the meantime I'll probably keep shouting at the politicians on the box, in a small way it does make me feel better!

Pascale Noel



Some of the more lurid headlines that have appeared in the past

## ... and the votes

Both main parties seem determined to use asylum and immigration as a major election issue and have launched a raft of proposals to address the 'problem'. Unsurprisingly, many of the proposed measures aim to reduce immigration and make it harder for asylum seekers to find safety in the UK. No doubt a vote winning formula...

### The Conservatives say:

- ⇒ they'd withdraw from the 1951 UN Convention on Refugees
- ⇒ introduce laws to allow the immediate removal of asylum seekers whose claims are 'clearly unfounded'
- ⇒ stop considering asylum applications inside the UK and instead take people from United Nations refugee camps

### Labour say:

- ⇒ they'd grant refugees temporary leave rather than permanent status to begin with, and keep the situation in their country under review
- ⇒ introduce stronger border controls
- ⇒ only allow skilled workers to settle long-term in the UK and impose English tests for everyone who wants to settle

## GDWG NEWS

### Introducing... Jessica Gustavsson, our new Detainee Support Worker!



Jessica started work at the end of March. Her role is detainee focussed and will help us respond more quickly to detainee requests for help from the office.

✓ Welcome also to **new volunteers**: Mahalaqa Zafar, Yasser El Hamad, Susan Jeffs, Christina Fitzsimmons and Anna Pincus.



### Don't miss Yasser's poem on page 4!

✓ The **Refugee Legal Centre (RLC)** are holding twice weekly surgeries at Tinsley for the foreseeable future. A caseworker comes down every Mon & Thurs and sits in the library from mid-morning onwards. A tannoy call informs detainees when they arrive.

✓ A high number of **Chinese detainees** are passing through the centre at the moment. We're desperate for Mandarin speaking volunteers – if you know anyone who might be interested, please let us know!

## DETENTION NEWS

### The good news....

✓ Detainees at Dover and Yarlswood are allowed to use their **mobile phones** at the moment. Depending on the success of the pilot, this may be permitted across the estate in the future.

✓ Public phones with an **email facility** have been installed at Dover. The cost to use them is prohibitive for many detainees but it's a step forward ... The campaign for free internet and email facilities continues!

### The bad news...

✓ The **welfare pilot** at Haslar has stalled. Immigration had agreed to employ a 'Welfare Officer' at the centre, but disputes between the HO and the prison service over funding have left the post vacant since the announcement last year.

✓ Yarlswood is now operating a '**fast-track**' system for asylum applications.

# LOW MORALE AND LOST DOCUMENTS

## Enquiry into Lunar House (Immigration Headquarters)

*'Go away, I do not want to see you in this building' says the official. You get back in the queue and see another official – the original one rushes over, 'Get out'. You return the next day and are treated in the same way. How would you feel if you were spoken to like this by a government representative, after having travelled all the way to Croydon and queued for hours to try to sort out the settlement of a family member in this country?*

This is what happened to a friend of mine – a volunteer with the group.



Lunar House in Croydon

and lowest morale.

*In March – some years after my friend's dreadful experience – she and I attended an enquiry into Lunar House, organised by the South London Citizens (SLC). This is an alliance of faith congregations, trade union branches, schools and community groups committed to working together for the common good. The SLC organised this enquiry to hear testimonies from staff and service users in front of an eminent panel of Bishops, professors, and lawyers. Their aim was not to challenge national policy on asylum and immigration, but to learn how to humanise the process.*

*It was humbling to hear the personal testimonies; the rape victim interrogated where all could listen, the verbal abuse, the telephones not answered, the hours of waiting and the sagas of lost documents. I was proud of my friend who had the courage to give her testimony, despite the fact that her case is not yet settled.*

Felicity Dick

### UNHCR 'Quality Initiative' project

Asylum rights advocates have long been raising concerns over the poor quality of Immigration's initial decisions on asylum applications. In May 2004, the Home Office invited the UNHCR (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees) to assist them in addressing this problem.

For ten months, a small UNHCR team was placed in Lunar House, and reviewed 267 first instance decisions at random. Problems identified include:

- Flawed procedures in dealing with some asylum claims,
- Failure to refer to country of origin information (COI), and misapplication of COI,
- Failure to consider obvious European Convention on Human Rights issues.

It went on to make 3 main recommendations:

- **Training:** From 1 April 2005, all new casework staff should be provided with training that would culminate in their being assessed according to an accreditation system (similar to existing OISC one)
- **Improved COI:** A broader range of up-to-date and accurate COI should be made available. This should entail a complete overhaul and upgrading of the IT research tools used by caseworkers.
- **Stress management:** More importance should be given to stress management for staff. In the UNHCR's words: *'Ignoring stress can result in staff burn-out, compassion fatigue and leads to a reduction in the quality of decisions and to high staff turnover.'*

*We look forward to the UNHCR's follow-up report in August/September 2005.*



### Legal Aid cuts One year on

**It is almost a year since the cuts to legal aid for immigration and asylum work were first implemented – and it has been a tough year for those deprived of their liberty in Britain's detention centres.**

Our attempts to help detainees access good quality legal advice have been hampered, as more and more solicitors drop out of the business or go private. This month we learnt that the only immigration solicitor within a 20-mile radius of Tinsley has closed. In fact in January this year we only found one detainee a solicitor, compared to 24 in the same month in 2003 – and this in an environment where one in three people contacting us is unrepresented.

**The problem was addressed in depth at BID's AGM in January.** The speakers explored ways in which to empower asylum seekers. The Women's Resource Centre explained how they have set up a resource room to enable women to carry out their own research to back up their cases. The UNHCR told how they have worked in countries where there is no legal aid at all, helping law schools to set up legal clinics where their best students can provide legal assistance for free. The London College of Law pointed out that there are 80 law schools and over 30,000 law students in the UK – an untapped resource? They are currently running a project on a London estate in which law students run 'law literacy' sessions for residents. With proper

***The only immigration solicitor within a 20-mile radius of Tinsley has closed***

training and supervision, they felt that this could be replicated to help asylum seekers. And then, of course, BID's successful bail notebook has enabled detainees to understand the bail system and present their own cases in court. Whilst these are all creative solutions to the situation, everyone agreed that it is crucial for organisations to continue campaigning against the legal aid cuts.

**The way forward for us?** We are still pursuing plans to become accredited to give low-level legal advice ourselves, and are applying for the Legal Services Commission 'Quality Mark'. This opens up the possibility of training a staff member to OISC level two. In January, we met with the 'Head of Asylum' at the Legal Services Commission in January, and he will be coming to visit our offices at the end of April. This will enable us to explore ways to continue pressing for better access to legal advice for detainees – in Tinsley and across the detention estate.

# Inquiry ordered after BBC documentary

An undercover investigation, shown on BBC1 in February, revealed racism and bullying against detainees by GSL staff at Oakington Reception Centre. It also included secret filming of escort officers talking of physically and racially abusing detainees in their charge.

Last year, over 20 detainees we were in contact with told us of being seriously mistreated during attempted removals, backing up the claims made in the documentary. These case studies were passed on to the programme makers during the research stages and several GDWG members and former Tinsley detainees were interviewed to substantiate evidence that had been collected by the BBC.

Following the airing of the programme, fifteen GSL officers were suspended from duty. Des Browne, the Immigration Minister, has enlisted the Prison's Ombudsman to conduct an investigation into the allegations.

The Association of Visitors to Immigration Detainees (AVID) has been contacted by the Ombudsman as part of this enquiry, and they will be passing on evidence and data collected from the visitors groups which support the BBC evidence.



## Meeting Anna

Anna Cooke became a visitor three years ago, yet most of her life has been dedicated towards helping others.

As a young woman in Austria, Anna first trained as a kindergarten teacher, before working in a home for blind children and then an orphanage. 'I felt there was a lot that was wrong with these institutions, especially in the way children who had supposedly misbehaved were treated,' she says. 'I tried to change things, but I was too young and inexperienced at the time.' This disillusionment led her to England, where she met her husband and started a family.

Three daughters, two adopted sons with learning difficulties, and three sons down the line... Anna juggles being a mum and having a paid job as a carer, with her voluntary work for GDWG and CAFOD. 'There is something in me that makes me want to reach out to people less fortunate than myself.'

It was a journey to Kenya in 1997 that was to mark a significant turning point in Anna's life. As part of a team of CAFOD volunteers, she travelled around the country, visiting different CAFOD projects, as well as a refugee camp. 'This was a true eye-opener,' she recalls. 'Meeting these refugees, yet being so powerless to help them, touched me deeply.' Since then, part of her work with CAFOD has been giving talks to schoolchildren – most recently on the genocide in Rwanda, and the country's journey towards reconciliation.

As a GDWG visitor, Anna has visited many people over the years, yet one woman in particular has touched her life in ways she never anticipated: 'When I met Olive, she was five months pregnant and had already served several months in prison – for no other crime than having used a false passport to flee an extremely abusive and dangerous situation in Cameroon.'

Anna visited Olive for two months in Tinsley House. Despite a difficult pregnancy and her growing emotional and psychological distress at being detained – which brought up painful memories and traumas from her past – Olive was only released due to an outbreak of chickenpox in Tinsley House. As she had no address to go to,

'Olive gave birth to a daughter, who she called Angel. My family grew close to her, and for the first time in her life, Olive started to relax and enjoy being a mother. But there were times when she felt fearful and depressed. She was so afraid of being in a closed space –

to take her in. They were me foster carers, so had oval.



Eventually, Olive and her daughter were granted NASS accommodation and dispersed to the north of the country. Life there is a struggle, and Olive is still awaiting a final decision on her asylum claim. But despite the distance, she has stayed in regular contact with Anna and her family – and Angel loves nothing more than to come down to see them for the occasional weekend

# What visitors do when they're not visiting...

At a recent Brighton meeting, volunteers pointed out that it would be nice to know what other organisations other members of the group are involved in. Given what a varied and interesting bunch of people you all are (!), we couldn't agree more. So here's the first piece in the 'What Visitors do when they're not visiting' series.

## Crawley Inter Faith Network



**Visitors involve** *The Crawley Inter Faith Network aims to encourage an atmosphere of goodwill and peace between different faith communities, to promote and reflect on common beliefs, as well as celebrate diversity and to help create understanding and respect of each other. Recently set up by the Borough Council, meetings take place in the Town Hall on the second Tuesday of every month, and most of the faith groups are usually represented, especially Christians (from various denominations), Muslims, Sikhs, and Hindus.*



I became involved when I (foolishly) asked whether our Churches Together in West Crawley should be involved – so I was appointed! (A classic example of 'don't speak up, you might be appointed!')

Our task at the moment is to arrange an open day to inaugurate the Network and at the same time show the great variety of faiths that exist in Crawley. This has been arranged for Saturday 25<sup>th</sup> June in a Town Centre location, starting with a lunch at 12 noon followed by speakers and an exhibition portraying the different faiths in the town.

My own contribution has been to organise a public meeting on 12<sup>th</sup> April (at 7:45pm, in St John's Church Hall), at which a speaker will tell us about her time as an ecumenical accompanier in Palestine. I organised this meeting because I was surprised that so few people and organisations in Crawley had heard of this Ecumenical Accompaniers Programme to Palestine and Israel, which sends three volunteers at a time to support and accompany Palestinians and Israelis who are having difficulties with the authorities. Sometimes, just the presence of an observer is enough to moderate the attitude or behaviour of the security forces.

## Training Update

Thank you to everyone who responded to the training survey. As a result we have re-evaluated the training offered to visitors and introduced a mandatory session for anyone joining the group in the future. This will be after the induction and before a new member is permitted to visit.

The legal and psychological training will continue as normal. Dates for the coming year (all at the Free Church) are:

## Horrible suffering stop me breathing

Prisoners behind bars, but innocent.  
*Crossing the mountains, the valleys and the rivers*  
Running away from unfair and unjust treatment,  
To the lands of freedom and human rights?  
But unfortunately, they found a sign saying  
"Welcome to detention, our visitors".



Oh God. Am I here or having a nightmare  
Which I will forget when I awake?  
Not at all! It's real, not fake.  
This is the reward for coming to ask for help.  
Where is the justice and our human rights?  
And is the reason for fighting in Iraq 'Freedom'?  
Is it all lies? Or are we blind?!!  
The answer is there but nobody wants to hear.

*(all respect to the honourable people who try to help)*

Yasser El Hamad

Yasser is a former Tinsley House detainee from Palestine, now settled in the UK and a GDWG visitor (Horsham group).

'Boundaries' with psychotherapist Theresa MacIntyre – Thurs 21<sup>st</sup> Apr 6.30pm

'Legal Aspects of Detention' with Mary Lean – Thurs 19<sup>th</sup> May 7.30pm & Tues 8<sup>th</sup> Nov 3pm

'Suicide Awareness' with consultant clinical psychologist Maeve Crowley – Thurs 20<sup>th</sup> Oct 6.30pm

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