

Gatwick Detainees Welfare Group Newsletter

Summer 2008

Registered Charity, Number 1124328

Expanding the Detention Estate



Home Office

Brook House and beyond

Many of you will have seen the announcement in May of the Home Office's plans to increase the capacity of the detention estate from 2,500 beds to 3,800-4,000. 426 of these beds will be at Brook House, half a mile away from Tinsley House, but there are also plans to expand Harmondsworth, Dover and Oakington, and to open another large centre either at Bicester in Oxfordshire or Yarl's Wood in Bedfordshire.

The Minister of State for Borders and Immigration, Liam Byrne, summed up the government's policy when he said, 'We now remove an immigration offender every eight minutes – but my target is to remove more, and remove them faster.'

For the time being at least it seems as though government immigration policy is only going to get tougher, which means that groups such as ours are likely to become more stretched and more needed. As Donna Covey at the Refugee Council stated, 'Locking up people who have done nothing wrong is costly and unnecessary.' We have all seen first hand the impact that detention can have on the individual.

Last month I went with some of the Management Committee to meet Andy Clark, the man at GSL who will be overseeing the Brook House project. He told us that the centre will open in either in late February or early March next year. The building is in an 'H' shape, with four separate wings. There is also an activities section, including an internet suite, open to detainees from different wings at different times.

Detainees will be accommodated in two-bed rooms, with television and toilet facilities. They will be locked into these rooms from 9 pm to 6 am. Any detainee who does not have a mobile phone will be issued with one.

Brook House will be more secure than Tinsley House, and may be used to house some ex-prisoners who have been convicted of serious offences. However, we have been told that such people would be vetted and risk-assessed before being placed there.

We are still working out how to operate at the new centre, and will be consulting other groups, as well as our own volunteers, about this. Due to the delay in opening, we will not be recruiting our support worker for Brook House until the beginning of next year.

Nic Eadie

Clothes/toiletries

We are running very low on both men's clothes, especially trousers (jeans, tracksuit or casual) and trainers/shoes, as well as toiletries. We particularly need shower gel, body lotion/moisturisers, men's deodorants and toothpaste/brushes. Bags/suitcases are also always in demand. Should anybody know of any sources for any of these, please let the office know as soon as possible.

Third Country cases – The Dublin Convention

Many of us will have visited detainees who are facing removal to another European country, having fallen under the so-called ‘third country’ rule, whereby an asylum seeker can be sent back to another European country to have their application processed there. This rule is enshrined in the Dublin Convention, first drawn up in 1990, but not ratified until 1997. Its purpose is to establish a common framework for determining which country in the EU decides an asylum seeker’s application, and to ensure that only one member state should process each application.

Four non-EU countries have been added to the list of safe third countries: the USA, Canada, Switzerland and Norway. If an asylum seeker has passed through any of these countries en route to the UK, the Home Office only look at their case in exceptional circumstances, such as very strong family links to the UK.

Most third country returns we see involve Greece and Italy, although we have also encountered people facing removal to France, Spain, Germany, Switzerland, Sweden and Holland.

When an applicant first makes a claim for asylum, their fingerprints are checked on a Europe-wide database. If their prints

have been taken in any other country on the way to the UK, the Home Office will ask the third country to accept the person back to make their claim there.

What commonly happens is that a person is arrested by the Greek or Italian police, detained and then told to leave the country within a certain period. They will then make their way to another European country, such as the UK, where they may have been led to expect a warmer welcome. However, they are often detained and removed.

There is a growing body of evidence that many asylum seekers face poor treatment in Greece in particular, and we in the office have heard first-hand of people being beaten and threatened by the Greek authorities. Such people are scared of what will happen to them if they return to Greece, and believe that their asylum claims will not be dealt with fairly.

Up until last month, the Refugee Legal Centre was challenging the removal of an Afghan national to Greece. There was an initial decision in favour of the applicant, but this was overturned by the Court of Appeal. It appears that for the time being at least, challenging removals to Greece will not be possible under normal circumstances. We will keep you informed if this situation changes.

Nic Eadie

Congratulations!

GDWG’s Treasurer, Adrian Radford, has won one of four ‘Everybody Counts’ awards from the Institute of Chartered Accountants, with a prize of £2,000 for GDWG. The awards were given to Chartered Accountants who use their professional skills to help charities, based on their commitment, level of involvement, and the difference their work had made. Adrian could hardly fail to win!

Adrian was one of GDWG’s first five volunteers in 1995 and became Treasurer when we gained charitable status in 1996. His knowledge of recruitment procedures and employment law stood us in good stead when we hired our first Coordinator in 1998, and his understanding of charity law has helped us to develop good practice and government. His annual accounts and budgets have underpinned successful fundraising from the very beginning, and established the sound financial basis which helped us to win our first lottery funding in 2001.

Since 1995 the Group has helped over 5000 detainees, and won four major awards. None of this would have been possible without Adrian’s calm and generous commitment and hard work. Yet he does all this in addition to a challenging full-time job and other voluntary commitments including taking disabled children to Lourdes.

Congratulations, Adrian – and thank you!



Adrian Radford (left) and John Barrett (GDWG Chair) on June 3.



Independent Asylum Commission reports findings

Saving Sanctuary, the Independent Asylum Commission's report on the implementation of national policies on asylum, was published recently. The IAC, which has been collecting evidence since 2006, makes 48 recommendations.

IAC uses the word 'sanctuary' rather than 'asylum', because of their research found that 'asylum' was perceived negatively. The report examines how to restore public support for sanctuary through, for example, educational outreach work, and a 'sanctuary summit'.

When the IAC launched its review, its aims and process seemed idealistic and ambitious. It undertook seven themed public hearings and convened 50 'people's commissions', where ordinary citizens were encouraged to put forward their views on asylum seekers. The transcripts reveal recurring themes, prejudices and aspirations, and shocking stories. The resulting document gets to the heart of many practical problems faced by those applying for asylum and looks at what must be done to make the asylum system less adversarial and less heavily weighted against the asylum seeker. The only negative aspect of the report is its tone towards economic migrants.

The report found wide agreement on five key values:

- people fleeing persecution should be able to find sanctuary in safe countries
- the UK should have effective border controls
- the UK should have a fair decision-making body that takes pride in giving sanctuary to those that need it
- people seeking sanctuary should be treated humanely and should make a contribution to the UK if they are able
- once a decision has been made the UK should act swiftly to implement integration or a safe and sustainable return.

The 48 recommendations address many issues frequently confronted by GDWG volunteers – including the poor quality of initial asylum decisions and lack of legal representation. The IAC insists that asylum seekers should not be penalised for arriving without a passport or with forged papers if they have done so for understandable and non-criminal reasons. The Commissioners advise a 'protection culture' with asylum seekers treated as a distinctive group rather than being subsumed into other areas of Home Office responsibility such as control of borders and migration in general.

The full report can be found at www.independentasylumcommission.org.uk. Two further reports, on the Commissioners' conclusions and recommendations, will be released later this summer.

Anna Pincus

VIDEO LINK BAIL HEARINGS

Visitors are probably aware by now that hearings for detainees applying for bail from Tinsley House no longer take place in court but by video link. The detainee is taken to a designated room in the detention centre and the television screen enables them to see the Immigration Judge, the solicitor (if he/she has one), the Home Office official, Court Clerk, his/her sureties and the interpreter.

The detainee is supposed to be given a choice whether he/she would rather go to Court. If not, they should have ten minutes before the Court sits, to talk with their legal representative.

BID (Bail for Immigration Detainees) is interested in detainees' experiences of video hearings because the process is new and they want to find out whether it is working for bail applicants and to write a report which will be sent to MPs, government and journalists. They have devised a questionnaire which should be completed by the detainee and his/her visitor. Detainees' names will not be used in the report.

Questionnaires are available from the GDWG office.

Remember that if your detainee does not have a solicitor to represent him/her at a bail hearing we have at least seven volunteers from GDWG and Brighton Voices in Exile who have done the MacKenzie Friends training and will do all the preparation work for the hearing and ask the Judge if they can speak on behalf of the detainee.

Celia Stubbs, Volunteer, Brighton group

GDWG News

SECTION 4 UPDATE

Recent changes in the rules concerning Section 4 support now means that ALL detainees are able to get an offer of a Section 4 address and support, no matter what their individual circumstances. This is of course great news, and means that applying for this kind of support, which gives an address for a bail hearing, is now very straightforward. All the detainee now needs to do is complete their personal details and then sign the form at the bottom. Please contact the office if you need a copy of the form, or you would like us to assist your detainee in making an application.

VOLUNTEERS

Welcome to our new volunteers; Stewart Mutero, Betty Zrioual (Crawley group), Tracey Khan, Tamsin Robertson, Rosanna Bayley, Jill Francis (Brighton group) and Isabel Brough, who is dropping bags off to Tinsley once a week

EXPENSES

Please note that the Management Committee have agreed a couple of changes in terms of expenses. First of all, the mileage allowance for those who drive to Tinsley has increased from 25p a mile to 30p, as of 1st July. Also, could we please ask volunteers to put in expenses claims no more than three months after they are dated.

SEARCHES AT TINSLEY

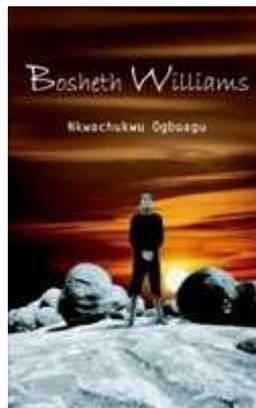
We have been informed that all GDWG volunteers will be subject to pat-down searches upon entry to the visits room, in line with the practice for non-GDWG visitors. This is due to a security review.

Book Review by Anna Pincus;

Bosheth Williams by Nkwachukwu Ogbuagu

I felt privileged to become acquainted with Nkwachukwu Ogbuagu on the telephone from the office. Through a unique coincidence, the volunteer who visited had the same name as a character in his novel Bosheth Williams. I was excited to find Bosheth Williams on Amazon and disappointed when Nkwachukwu was moved to a different detention centre before I could meet him to talk about his work!

Nkwachukwu comes from South East Nigeria and has written five novels, two books of short stories and eight collections of poetry. Bosheth Williams is the story of a young man who holds onto his aspirations for a career in law despite the lack of opportunities in a repressive political climate. The political allegory in his novel has made it difficult for Nkwachukwu to return to Nigeria. However, unfortunately he was returned back to Nigeria in June.



The book is remarkably controlled and restrained. Unlike Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie and other Nigerian writers more familiar in UK bookshops, Nkwachukwu does not graphically depict the brutality of a society torn apart by political unrest. The attitudes of villagers, and the sayings and metaphors through which they express their philosophy of life, are vividly conveyed. The reader meets a world of spirits, charms, spells and incantations, a world of hunger and pain and poverty, and watches the effects upon Bosheth who Nkwachukwu uses to represent much more than one individual.

Language can limit our interactions with detainees. So it is a gift to read Nkwachukwu's novel and to gain an insight into the problems of the society he has left behind and the culture he has brought with him.

Should anyone like to like to read the book, we have a copy in the office which we are happy to lend out. He has been in touch with us since being removed, and would like to hear from anyone who has read his book.

Immigration News

New Immigration rules

Changes in the Immigration Rules which came into force as of April 1st this year have enforced mandatory bans on returning to the UK for people who have breached UK immigration law, typically by overstaying any leave to remain, or refused asylum seekers staying in the country after all appeals have been exhausted, and their temporary admission status runs out. These bans range from one to ten years, the maximum being for those who were removed at the government's expense. This essentially means that anyone in detention who is then removed will face a ten-year ban from being granted leave to enter the UK. However, there are certain concessions to these rules, such as those wishing to apply to join family in the UK, children and victims of trafficking. For more information on this, please check out ILPA's information sheets on the changes, at www.ilpa.org.uk in the info service section.

Nic Eadie

Beaches, bombs and bus drivers - touring Sri Lanka by motorbike

My recent trip to Sri Lanka left an indelible impression on me: a magical country with reminders everywhere of conflict and tragedy. Armed conflict in Sri Lanka has killed 60,000 people in the last 25 years, and, as those who have visited Tamil detainees will know, serious human rights abuses take place in the country.

The day after I arrived from Gatwick, my girlfriend and I set off up the West Coast on an old Honda 250cc motorbike, rented for just £5 a day. It was not long before we reached the first of many army roadblocks, set up mainly it seemed to search vehicles heading southwards from the Tamil areas towards the capital, Colombo. There had been a number of bomb blasts in Colombo in recent months and security was high. We got through with disbelieving stares from the soldiers, and a few smiles and waves.

We had to give up on our attempt to visit the brother of a former Tinsley House detainee when we found the road north to Mannar closed to all but government approved vehicles. Instead we headed back south, staying at ancient cities and beautiful lakes along the way, spent one night in Kandy, and then went on to the never-ending tea estates and panoramic views of the Hill Country. While we were there, a bomb blast killed a popular government minister as well as a large number of civilians at a



rally in Kandy. It was all quite surreal, as we felt completely safe, in our tourist bubble.

We travelled on south to the coast, through monsoon conditions at times, to find stunning, almost deserted, beaches. The scars of the tsunami, which killed 30,000 people, were still clear to see, although thanks to rebuilding most of the beaches had places to stay. There were not many tourists, however, partly because of the time of the year, and partly because of the political strife. This was clearly making things hard for those who relied on tourism for their living.

We finished our holiday in a secluded eco-resort, on a farm which had once been a tea estate. We were the only people staying there, and spent three wonderful days reading, walking and picking leeches off our feet! The final drive back up to Colombo was marked by numerous near misses with buses driven by psychopathic drivers at top speeds along the pot-holed highways. The law of the road in Sri Lanka seems to be the smaller you are, the less right you have to be there.

We were both extremely sad to be leaving such a wonderful country, which, for all its problems, has some of the friendliest people I have ever met and some of the most diverse and beautiful landscapes I have seen.

Nic

Can you help?



If anyone can help with any of the following, please contact the office.

- Dropping off bags to Tinsley - If you happen to pass close to the office on your way to visiting, it would help us enormously if you could give the office a call to see if there are any parcels needing to be taken in for detainees.
- Weekend telephone rota - We have a number of volunteers who check the detainee ansaphone remotely at the weekends, and make calls to detainees in case of emergency. Typically this only takes a few minutes, and you would only be on duty once in every two or three months.
- Giving talks about the group - We are asked to do a number of talks to local groups and organisations throughout the region, to explain who we are and what we do. If you are interested in becoming a GDWG speaker, we have training and materials available to you.

Meet Sue Jeffs, one of our Mandarin students...

Sue Jeffs is a ballet dancer, drawn to GDWG through a talk in her church, because, she says, she has experienced 'being a stranger in a strange land'. 'If one of my children was alone in a strange land, I would hope that someone would extend a hand of compassion to them'.

Sue lived in Middle and Far East as a child growing up. She trained as a classical ballet dancer, and then travelled extensively as a dancer and teacher. She has a passion for languages and is particularly drawn to the art, dance, music and language of China.

Having studied Mandarin one morning a week for two years at SOAS, Sue is much appreciated in the GDWG volunteers' Mandarin classes! Sue describes how, when she visited China with a group of international dance educators in 1996, she was moved by the political history and in particular by the impact of the 'cultural revolution' of which she had not been aware as a child growing up in the Far East. This inspired an academic journey, through a Masters on the use of western classical ballet as an instrument of propaganda during the Cultural Revolution. In recent years she has developed close links with a leading Chinese dance historian – Madame Dong.

Sue's family continue in her artistic footsteps: one child is a ballet dancer and one an actor. Sue is currently cutting back on her teaching workload, and GDWG hopes to be the beneficiary of this as we look forward to reaching out to Mandarin speakers detained at Tinsley House.

Anna Pincus

News from the management committee

Our funders are always invited to our AGM and happily this year we had two attendees. They said they were very impressed with our work and how we are run and since then have made some useful suggestions about funding.

Adrian Radford, our treasurer, has won an 'Everyone Counts' award from the Institute of Chartered Accountants, which will bring £2000 to the group. Adrian's long commitment to GDWG was praised during the President's Dinner on June 3 and it was good for me, as Chair, to hear the work of GDWG being explained and commended to the ICA members.

The delay in the opening of Brook House until February 2009 and the fact that Opportunities for Volunteering (OFV) are bound to giving their funds from April to April caused us lengthy discussion, so we are pleased that our request for a delay in the grant till April 2009 has been accepted. We will be recruiting an extra member of staff to work specifically with those detained at Brook House in January 2009 and are now seeking funds for the extra three months.

We have had an initial meeting with Andy Clark who is leading the G4S team who are planning the building of Brook House. They will not have access to the building until September and we hope that some of our ideas will influence the structure and running of the new centre.

At the end of April the management team had a training session from the local CVS. Much of the content was not new but it is reassuring that we are doing things properly and the session resulted in some good ideas and different ways of approaching problems.

GDWG is finally, and after much effort from Adrian, a charitable company limited by guarantee. This move has been mostly prompted by our growth over the years as we now have more staff and are leasing larger offices. Trustees are, however, still liable for negligent conduct!

John Barrett, Chair

Dates for your diary

22nd July – All Visitor's Meeting, organised by the Oxted group. To take place at 7pm at the Three Bridges Free Church, just next to the office.

15th and 22nd July – 'Catch-up' Mandarin lessons, for any newcomers who would like to join the GDWG Mandarin course in September. 9.15 – 10.45 in Burgess Hill

Next group meetings -
Reigate – 3rd July
Horsham – 10th July
Brighton – 11th July
Crawley – 30th July
Oxted – 4th August