

Anonymous

I was born in Liberia, very close to the border with Guinea, on 15th December 1986.

When I was 15 years old, war started and I was kidnapped to be a child soldier.

Me and my uncle escaped and came to England. We came to England in December 2002. It was snowing! My uncle and I came to Croydon, after landing at Heathrow Airport.

My uncle left me in the queue for immigration. He went to Canada – he wanted to leave me in a safe place. My uncle is in Canada now.

After a short spell in a Children's Home, I was given my own flat at the tender age of 16. My English was very poor and the only friends I had were people who took drugs and alcoholics. Almost inevitably things went wrong and I ended up in Youth Detention Centre and then in prison. Life was hard for me, as so many things were going on which I didn't understand, because of the language and cultural barriers.

As my prison sentence was coming to an end, I began to look forward again to leaving. The day before my sentence was finished, I gave all my stuff away to friends, getting ready to be released.

The next morning I was waiting for the staff to come and release me. They came and I was all excited when I saw them and expected to be given my release papers.

However, they gave me a different piece of paper; it was from Immigration, stating that I was not going to be released.

I was being held awaiting deportation.

I was kept in prison for a couple of months and then I was sent to the Detention Centre at Colnbrook near Heathrow Airport. I was put in the Short-term Area and then sent to the Long-term Area. At first I was banged up 24 hours a day – but at least I had a shower in my cell!

Then they gave me a mobile phone, so that was also different to life in prison! And the food was different to prison – there was more Afro-Caribbean food, because of the background of those detained there. It was more like the food I was used to at home.

Despite liking the food, I did go on hunger strike, because I was fed-up as my sentence was finished and I was awaiting release, but then found myself back in detention. I was really fed-up.

The food was nice, but because of my anger I couldn't enjoy it. After I was sent to the Long-term Area, I started to speak to long-term detainees there who had been there a long time; three, four years or more. They were still waiting....

It was hard for me believe it. It was hard to understand how people were being treated, being locked up for nothing for 4 years. They were having psychological damage inflicted upon

them and a lot of people ended up with mental health issues, because they were locked up too long.

When on hunger strike, I was told to eat and I was sent to the Segregation Block. The next day, the Governor came to see me, saying that I had to eat. They sent me to the Hospital Wing. I was there on a Sunday and I saw people going past with Sunday dinner. I could smell the gravy! I have always loved that meal!

I rang the buzzer and they came to the door and asked me what I wanted. I just looked at them. They said, "you have got to eat". They said they would help me, if I ate so I gave in to the smell of the gravy and the chicken!

Once I started eating, I was back on the Wing. Things were back to the normal and I started to get my case together with my solicitor.

When I was in Colnbrook, the appeal, to allow me to have custody of my daughter, which had started in prison continued and I was given a court date in the next two months. Now I had something to look forward to.

When I was in the detention centre, my first daughter was in care and I had another court case, because of the problems I had had in the past. It was wearing on me having to fight two cases at the same time.

When I was in the detention centre, I was fighting for custody of my daughter and the Home Office knew that I had that case, but I was never allowed to be released to fight the case, as I should have been, so my daughter was adopted. At the last hearing, the judge said that he couldn't give me custody as I was in detention, but I shouldn't have been in detention, because I was recommended by John Reid, the Home Secretary, not to be deported.

I went for my appeal against my deportation, but it was dismissed, because I had committed a crime. They didn't think about my age and the life I had lived. The Home Office didn't want to listen to any positive things in my favour, only negative things and they made me look so bad. My case worker based in the Liverpool Office, made my case look as bad as he could.

I have a letter from the Home Office dated 1st March 2007, a copy of which I enclose, in which the Home Secretary, John Reid, states his displeasure at my committing a crime for which I went to prison, but then goes on to say, "in all circumstances, however, the Secretary of State has decided not to take any action against you on this occasion".

The letter was dated 1st March 2007, but was never released until my bail hearing on 2nd January 2008, when my bail was guaranteed. This happened because of help from outside the system. This meant that I was unable to prevent my daughter from being adopted and this still hurts me until this day. If I hadn't been in detention, which I shouldn't have been, according to the letter from the Home Secretary, I would have had far more chance of getting custody of my daughter.

Out of everything, my sentence was supposed finish on 28th June 2007 and I was supposed to get released, because the Home Secretary had already written a few months earlier, that on this occasion no action would be taken against me. However, six months later at the end of December, I was still in detention.

My indefinite leave to remain should have not been revoked. I should be able to get on with my life, but I am in limbo. When I asked for my photo ID, which could have helped me get an education and a bank account, I was told I was not allowed to have this, because in the past I had been given indefinite leave to remain, and this was still on their system, so they would not give me the ID. However, as we have seen, this indefinite leave to remain, was then revoked even though the Home Secretary had said in a letter on 1st March 2007, that he would take no action with regards to my conviction. I was stuck in limbo.

Eventually on 2nd January 2008, I was released. After a certain time in immigration detention, you are allowed to apply for bail, but if you don't have a family in the country, which of course I didn't, there is a Home Office Section, which helps you with what is called Section 4 under NAAS Support.

I sent the application to the Home Office, but my application was refused.....because I had originally been given indefinite leave to remain! I was going round in circles....

A little while later I was having a night out in Coventry. It was late, so instead of going back to the Peace House in Coventry, where I was staying, which I thought would have been disrespectful, I followed my friend, so that I could stay at his girlfriend's house for the night. We walked up there and as his girlfriend liked a joke, she wouldn't open the door. As a result of this, we ended up throwing a couple of stones at her window. It was late at night.

One of the neighbours must have called the police, as they soon arrived. I remember that they came very quietly, without the siren, so I couldn't hear it. I suddenly turned around and saw a police car very close to where I was standing.

I ran away, but ended up in a dead end and had to hide in a bush. The police pointed a taser gun at me as they thought that I might have a gun with me. They were worried about what I might have with me, because of the way I acted. They weren't being racist.

They got me and now I was sent to the police station. There, they checked my name and it came up that the Immigration people were looking for me, so from the police station, I was picked up by Immigration and I was taken in a van to Harmondsworth in London. It was a long journey, in what was basically a cage. On another occasion in a van like this one, the atmosphere had been so bad that I found it hard to breathe.

I was back at Harmondsworth and I was stressed and feeling a lot of pain again. However, after a while I settled down and started going to education and playing football.

However, being locked up caused me to suffer from mental health problems and become suicidal. I was put into a small space where I was on Suicide Watch.

Everything was taken from me, so that I couldn't use it to harm myself. I had an officer having to follow me everywhere. Sometimes my mind just went blank through the stress of it all. I was prescribed medication.

All this time I was angry about what was happening to me, but couldn't speak to the psychiatrists, as I couldn't communicate properly, not because of language difficulties, but because of my mental health problems.

I was causing a lot of trouble and so was seen as a troublemaker. They couldn't handle me, so I was sent to Colnbrook and then to Cansford House in Oxford.

I was being treated as a mental health sufferer in the detention centres, rather than somewhere they could help me, because they didn't want me to run away, which was their real concern.

I was being kept in detention centres, when I should have been treated for my mental health problems. I was put in the Block over and over again, sometimes for a month at a time. There was clearly a pattern to my behaviour, but nobody was concerned enough to deal with the situation.

I always used to think about this, because I knew I was suffering from mental health problems.

Finally, as nobody could handle my behaviour, and because it cost them so much money through extra staff, the governor came and told me I was going to prison.

I was picked up and taken to prison, even though I had committed no crime. I had my phone with me because I was allowed it in the detention centre. I had hidden the phone, because I didn't see why I couldn't have it, as I was still in detention under immigration law, NOT a convicted prisoner.

They were doing everything they could to make me fed up, so that I would say "send me back home". However, they don't know me, because I would rather stay here, because my two daughters are here and they need their dad. I also don't want to go back because of all the bad memories from the civil war.

The prison was Blakenhurst Prison, close to Redditch near Birmingham. I got charged because of having the phone. They took the phone from me although I explained it to them about how I was in detention through immigration, but they wouldn't listen. They didn't seem to understand my situation...and where I was coming from.

I ended up being charged for the phone, but I was actually treated better in prison, than I had been at the Detention Centre, as I was sent to the psychiatrist. They changed my medication and I began to socialise. I was calmer.

I was in prison now, but I was sorting myself out and I was happier than I was in the Detention Centre.

I didn't have a phone in the prison, but it hardly ever rang anyway. Having the phone in the Detention Centre hadn't been very helpful and when I saw people there talking on their phones, it upset me. I was better off without the phone, because all it did was remind me of how isolated and lonely I was.

More recently I was living with somebody, but experiencing mental health problems because of all the stress I had been through. I ended up back in court, because of my stress, and was given a community order.

Anyway, I went to court in 2013. The judge looked at the case and everything and decided not to give me a prison sentence. To be fair, I had already had a six-month sentence and what I had done, especially bearing in mind the problems I was having at the time, in no way warranted a six-month sentence.

Instead, the judge decided to give me a three-month community order.

The psychiatrist made it clear that I was not mad, but rather that I was depressed because of the circumstances I found myself in.

The community order meant that I needed to study how to behave.

Having been released from prison, I was supposed to be let out and I was supposed to be living in a bail hostel in Birmingham.

Then something about immigration came up....

The trial and outcome had become an item in the local newspaper. The newspaper was saying in the story that I was an illegal immigrant. This was simply not true, as I had come to Britain as an asylum seeker in 2002 and it cannot be illegal to seek asylum as the UK signed up to the 1951 United Nations Convention on Refugees.

Even more serious, is that the judge had never said that I was an illegal immigrant. It was bad reporting by the journalist, but it caused me a number of problems...

The Immigration people detained me again. Looking back, they had caused me all the stress and all the problems. If I had been allowed to work in the first place, years before, I wouldn't have had to rely on anybody to support me and I could have had my independence.

I was stressed when I was at my last girlfriend's but as ever I had nowhere else to go.

The judge had said that my life had been in limbo since 2006 and that the situation was crazy. He knew what was going on....

Indeed, the judge even went so far as to apologise to me....

Now, in September 2014, more than seven years after the Home Secretary John Reid, originally said I should be given no more than a warning, I still have to suffer the indignity of wearing an electronic tag and I am still in limbo, cannot work and am still suffering as a result.