

Experience of UK immigration detention

1. The following experience is based on my individual account. I was informed by Liz Thomas, Sanctuary in Wales Project Support and Development Officer (Displaced People In Action, DPIA) about the UK parliament gathering information on current immigration detention system. It took me almost two months to have the courage to sit down and think back, on such a dreadful experience, so inhumane, against everything I was ever taught about the western civilization (needless to say the UK).

2. I am going straight to the day of my arrest.... On 10th December, 2013, when all of the nightmare began....It was early in the morning around 7am, I was eating breakfast before going to college in the NASS accommodation which I was allocated since July 2012. The main door to my house was kicked open by 6 (maybe 4) Home officers, including 1 female. They came for me, and I was told another girl in the house was supposed to be arrested as well, but, since she never stayed in the house, she got lucked out. The home officers were nice enough to allow me to finish eating, searched me for safety reasons, and asked if I needed to take any belongs from my room. We jumped on the Home Office van, I sat in the middle row, (first time being hand-cuffed, endless experiences henceforth) it only took about 5 minutes to the Newport police station. After checking in, I was sent to a cell with a heated cement long bench/bed and a metal toilet; on the wall facing outward, there were a few glass blocks like those used in the bathroom. 10 minutes later, I was called out to the desk counter to make phone calls, I made two, to my close friend and to my solicitor, none of them had answered the phone, I suppose it was too early in the morning (around 7:30am). The policemen gave me two books to kill time with and a roll of toilet paper. Waiting to be picked up and sent else where. I cried so hard that I can not breath, soon, the whole roll of toilet paper was gone, I did not know what was going on, I did not know whether or not I can be alive the next second; I thought of my mother, I wanted to go home at that instant, maybe my flight had been booked. I thought the police station is for bad people/criminals, has my battle for freedom in the UK turned me to a criminal? I escaped to the UK for protection, isn't that where humanitarian rights are being highly recognized, doesn't the Royal family goes around the globe to spread love. How wrong was I.

3. Every second was so long, longer than a decade, I couldn't remember how I survived the first minute, hour, day! Mostly, I lied down on the heated bench, not much energy left in me. Lunch was a variety of microwaved food, with a choice of tea or coffee, I wanted none, just freedom. There was an abrupt pain developed in my right lower abdominal area extended to the back, the pain persisted for a while, I did not know whether the pain was psychological or physiological? I asked for a cup of water, it took ages before what I asked for came, I can no longer sit up to retrieve my water, constant pain, the police decided to take me to the hospital (Royal Gwent). The trip to the hospital was humiliating in every possible way, I was handcuffed and escorted by both a female and a male police escort. The usual irritating wait in the A&E almost killed me, the medical staff put me on drip. We arrived the hospital at around 5:30pm, I didn't return to my cell until 11-12 midnight. All of the medical results came out negative, nothing was wrong, but, something must be wrong, I have never felt such sudden pain anywhere in my body. A lady police took me back, she insisted on using handcuffs, possibly due to the fact that she was with me alone, so embarrassing, even a 90-year old dying man looked at me with disgust. When we went back to the police station, all the people on duty made fun of our safe return, that I was intact, I was suspected of running. I was exhausted, from pain and desperation, I tried to sleep, I was checked up on every 15-20 minutes, they alarm me by switching the light on and off...annoying! That was the end of my day one of the criminal life in a cell.

4. Day 2 started with breakfast, which consisted of a box of cornflakes, with a box of long lasting milk, I was not in the mood of

having anything. Again, time has froze on me, I lost control over everything. My mind went blank, not really, flashbacks, I almost had the same feeling of sleeping in the detention room at the airport on the night of arrival. Lunch time came around, I was not a fan of any. The strangest tremble I have ever encountered, my body started to shake, I had a seizure attack, I drawled, I called for help (I can't remember now, what mechanism was used to call for assistance/attention, a buzzer?). The heavy cell door was opened, policemen rushed in, I had rolled down from the bench to the floor, they carried me to a room that was closer to the desk for easier supervision, a female police came to comfort me while they called for the ambulance, I have lost speech, very blurred words came out of me, I don't want to die, I want to go home. This trip to the hospital was much more serious, I was carried in on the stretcher, the A&E seemed more packed than before, I didn't have any shoes on, gross, I was barefoot to the toilet and everywhere.... A very young doctor gave me a detailed examination, blood works were performed, we were informed to wait until around 2-3am for the results to come back. Every 2 hours, a pair of new police (a female and a male) would switch shifts, they all wanted to hear my story, I explained in brief words, they sympathized, they said I should ran, yeah right....without shoes and jacket, the temperature was around 10 degrees Celsius, I was already in too deep of a trouble, I don't want to cause anymore arousal? I was relaxed in the waiting room, free to move around, they had brought in my shoes later, very friendly group of people. My results turned out fine, meaning I was safe to leave. On returning to the police station, my cell had been moved to a supervised room, equipped with a surveillance camera, in case I die. I was in bed around 3-4 am. I want to die.

5. I was awoken by a visitor, my solicitor decided to see me, he gathered some information about the whole incident so far, he explained to me what he is going to My solicitor thought that anyone can not be held in the police station over 48 hours, I think the Home Office had answered him, with the exception to their detainees? Mr. Featonby is that correct? If not, how do I seek compensation for my mistreatment? In my views, there should be specific statements on holding an asylum seeker in custody. He planned to file a bail, which was rejected immediately. Later that afternoon, my solicitor had called to say that my mother called his office from home (my home country), she was extremely worried. My solicitor found me another firm to help, which turned out to be a (legal-aid) bogus, since this enquiry is restricted on detention status, my complaint on the legal aid firms shall be saved for another time. At 1pm, the hospital had booked me a MRI appointment for the abdominal pain, 2 male police accompanied me, one had recognized me, his wife had supervised me the night before, they have a pair of twins, it felt nice to carry a normal conversation with people, though I was handcuffed and talking to my escorts. My third day evening, I was feeling sick, I requested to be taken to the hospital, the cruel prison nurse, she must had weighed about 20 stones told me off, she said the NHS resources are not to be wasted on me, what does that suppose to mean? Isn't it true that anyone is entitled to NHS or healthcare if required, who is the nurse to decide what kind of medical treatment I need? and who receives medical attention? This is discrimination based on race and social status; this can be observed over and over again in Yarl's Wood detention centre, I will express my views in paragraph 11. I went back to my cell, I was not myself, with a combination of discomfort, stress, frustration and disbelief. I was able to sleep better, more blankets were provided. Late at night, around 12-1 am, the escort service (a lady) from detention came for me, I was so weak to move, just as I made it to the cell door, I clasped with another seizure attack, the escort refused to take me for health and safety reasons.

6. Friday morning seemed so long, well, not anymore longer than it already was. I almost lost count, my 4th day at the police station, how many more days? My friends had dropped off some books and magazines for me

to read, but I wasn't able to possess them, that's ok, I didn't want them, I didn't need them. The policemen expressed to me with what they considered were good news -- I will be re-arranged for pick up on Saturday, ok, in addition to that, they said, from what they heard, detention is much better than the police station. It was about time to get rid of me, I did not know where detention was? I did not care, what will happen to me? I was calmer later that evening, I asked for pen and paper, I wanted to write my mother a letter, I promised not to do anything else with the pen burrowed. I was allowed to make a phone call to my friend to thank them for the books, and shared with them that I am scheduled to be transferred tomorrow. Friday night was a busy night at the police station, numerous drunk people were brought in, I even recognized a voice -- Anna, she was a notorious homeless lady, who I had known from helping out with the night shelter at church.

7. On Saturday morning, I somehow found out that I could clean up myself, I haven't washed my hands, brushed my teeth, or showered since Tuesday morning....yew...I brushed my teeth for about 20 minutes. I wasn't able to shower, they were understaffed on the weekends. I could bear another day. I felt relieved, I wanted to leave, anywhere else is better than here?! I really hate the noise of lifting the window on the cell door, they are coming in 15 minutes, I should get ready. What to get ready for? Before I waved to all the staff at the police station, I looked up at the clock on the wall, 4:30pm. It was already 14th, December, I calculated my long stay there, 105 hours.....is that a record or what? Later, I found out from people at detention centre, my hours at the police station was too long, some lucky girl was picked up a few minutes later..... I felt the moist in the air as I stepped out of the door to the police station, my friends had held a rally by the main entrance to free me.

8. 4 people came to greet me from Serco (the official Home Office escort service), 1 white lady and 3 Indian men, that day I had talked the most in 4.5 days. I learned that escort job was a pain, not something I'd want to do, aside from being with sad people like me, their working hours are crazy. From Newport to Colnbrook took nearly 4 hours (with the typical resistance of rain and wind over the bridges). As we pulled near the gate to the entrance, I heard people calling my name, the driver told me there were protestors with my name written on the banners, they are my friends, the same group of people when we left the police station. I thank them for what they did for me.

9. I've been to Colnbrook once before, the 1st day after my arrival to the UK, as I mentioned, I spent my first night at the air port waiting to be transported somewhere, I wasn't picked up until the next afternoon. The driver had routed there to pick up a released Somalian detainee, his van broke down, I need to use the toilet, he took me in, scary! Perhaps my road to asylum was destined to end at where I started! The checking in process was a drag, my photo was taken -- I looked like a zombie, the clothing that my friend had prepared for me the day earlier was in use, along with snacks. I was starving! I was taken upstairs to a living room like setting, a huge tv, with sofa spread in front of it, a few treadmill were in the living room. The tv was playing the final of Britain's Got Talent, I couldn't remember who won.... There is a laundry room, a kitchen, a library (computer room), consultation room, a few dinner tables, and a desk for the staff. The staff offered dinner, yes, real food, it was chicken curry with rice, too heavy, I didn't want it, I spotted bottles of milks in the fridge and cereals, I grabbed a big bowl, starving. Each detainee was allowed 5 minutes of calling to anywhere globally, I called my mother, we both cried. There were 3 rooms on either side of the living room, I was assigned to a room with another Chinese girl. To my surprise, each room was equipped with a TV and 3 beds. I headed for the shower, the shower head was designed to stop supply running water every 25 seconds, annoying. My roommate and I exchanged our experiences, and we rested. I got my phone back, luckily my crappy Samsung phone was allowed to be kept,

smart phones with camera or internet functions were prohibited, to avoid photos taken I suspect. I quickly called my friends and solicitor. Another Chinese girl was sent to our room in the middle of the night, 3 detained Chinese girls!

10. We woke for breakfast at 8am, cereal and toast. I jumped on the computers, as I've been disconnect to the rest of the world. My time had stopped on 10th, December, it was 15th, December. The typical gloomy British winter with sprinkles of rain made is extraordinarily sad, looking out of the window from the computer room, I saw little individual (detention) building complex, this is a prison village, each had a chimney sticking out spitting white smoke. That scene resonates with that of East Berlin (non-existent), North Korea, Cuba or Russia, am I under a communism roof? Am I still on UK soil? I sure didn't seem being treated like a human. Human is entitled to freedom, where is my freedom, all the freedom I have left is the freedom to breath, but such constricted air, I prefer not. Lunch time came around shortly, pizza and chips. The staff called for a trip to the shop? Those who are interested could go, we didn't use real money, it was credit saved on each detainee's account, with a scan of finger, the transaction is done. What a high-tech method of shopping in this backward detention facility. As all the females were taken from building to building, thousands of doors were passed, each with a lock and a matching key, I am being locked up. There are sports facility for the predominately male residents at Colnbrook, creating a harmonious look... why are asylum seekers residents in detention? What right does Home Office have to deprive of human freedom from me? Bed time came, I was in my nightie, the staff informed to gather up my belongings, I am leaving...where? I called my solicitor and friends, they think the worst is off to Heathrow, the air port is merely 15 minutes away.... Checking out took an hour, the time reads 11pm. Finally my other Chinese roommate and I were on our way to somewhere...

11. The drive took almost 2 hours, we weren't heading to the air port. As we approached a heavily guarded iron gate, with huge camera heads everywhere, this is Yarl's Wood (YW) detention centre, what a gross place. Checking in took forever, all of my possession were stripped off me, a designated phone was provided to me in case YW needed to reach me. The detainees were being closely monitored and controlled, each staff carried tons of keys, every door must be locked to keep us out; we are not animals to be locked up in cages. As the staff walked us to our room, the first sentence he said was 'this is not a prison,' if not, please define what a prison is? YW is a modern concentration camp, how can anyone in the normal world believe such facility exists today? In the so-call civilized British society? In my opinion, prison is for people who have done misconducts, or violated laws, which rules and regulations have I gone against? I sign in at the police station on time, I haven't missed a single sign-in, I abided rules that were bounded to asylum seekers, I resided in NASS accommodations, I haven't worked illegally, I didn't gain sympathy by reproducing children after children. I pleaded for protection, humanitarian protection, I faced prosecution and persecution upon return to my home country. It made me feel like claiming asylum was a trap, a falsified image that the UK was trying to establish among western countries; in fact, the Home Office hated us, they didn't see us as human being, they didn't treat us with respect. Current reporting system is effective only for those who respects it, those who have gone missing from NASS accommodation or sign in get away with detention. Detention centre operated on its own, detainees were being alienated to a different world, the air we breathed was polluted with indifference. All the staff ignored to any/all of our requests, from seeking medical assistance to retrieving a package, it was almost like an unspoken rule for all of the staff, to turn their heads around and walk the other way as they were being approached by a detainee. The staff would rather stood around to chat than listen to our needs, I hope they realize that, we are the only reason that they have a

job. I recall, there was this older male staff, in his 50s, who appeared to be the only person who took genuine interests at our needs, who spent time helping us, later, I observed that, he would touch us (we were all female detainees) as the ladies stood close to converse, his 'friendly touches' were more of sexual than caring. I was frightened to voice my observation, as each staff has a pair of key to open the door to our room, the possibility of retaliation was phenomenal, I wouldn't want to risk it, I maybe a detainee at that moment, but, I still aspire freedom someday, I want to walk out the detention in one piece.

12. There is a medical clinic in the detention centre, it prescribes medication, takes blood samples, doctors and nurses are available to see detainees. The appointment waiting list is usually 1 month long, can discomfort and pain wait? Or the other option is to go back to the unit office and ask for pain killer up to 3 days, then one can gain priority to be examined by a nurse. The result of my blood work was never viewed by me, I asked to see my medical chart, the clinic wanted to charge me £10 (I couldn't remember the exact amount). Yes, healthcare facility can be accessed, but it does not fulfill the needs of detainees. YW detention facility is not a friendly environment for disabled detainees, there were 2 ladies on wheelchair, both lived on lower level (2-story building). Wheelchair must be assisted to go up for meals, and transported back down when finished eating, the elevator required a key from staff to function. The medical requests from these 2 ladies were usually unanswered, they were not getting the appropriate rehabilitative attention. At YW, underaged detainees were usually held along with families, families lived in a separate unit from the rest of us, due to the fact of male in the family. Legal service is available twice a week in the library, appointment slots fill up instantaneously, there are 3 partner firms that visit regularly; an apparent problem is language barrier, a detainee often finds someone who speaks their language to interpret for them. I played the role of an interpreter a few times, I got freaked out as I got involved with their cases. As hopeless as any detainee is, the last resort to rely on is religious/pastoral support, I remember vividly, on new year's eve, the tv televised live countdown from London Eye, we formed a circle holding each other's hand tightly, praying for tomorrow to be a better day, as we have done no wrong.

13. A total of my 34 days were spent in YW detention centre, and 1 night in Colnbrook; more than enough in anyone's life experience. My phone was the sole source to keep me in touch with the outside world, only when I speak on the phone do I feel alive. I often would sat in front of the desk in my room, looking out of the window and talking on the phone, friends would tell me what was going on in the normal world. It rained so much during my days in YW, I would like to have rain splash on me to feel the coldness, I tried to stick my face out of the window slot, but, either my head is too big or the window opened so narrow, I seriously doubt the size of my head. Luckily there was a library equipped with books, I killed time by reading Jane Austin and finished all three Hunger Games. Phoning friends was the greatest life support, in fact, it was my friends phoning me, I had no money to top up my phone. My good friend Tammie sang to me on Christmas and New Year's day, she sent me the lyrics of my favorite church songs to bring me hope. Another kind friend Liz topped up my phone credit, enabled me to call home to inform my arrival date. Good friends with warm hearts helped me through that rough time, a simple phone call or text was more than enough to cheer me up, I felt blessed to have made good friends in Wales. Having visitors from support groups was amazing, hearing voice from friends is one thing, but being visited by an actual human being from the normal world is another. I had a couple of visitors from various organizations, they put me in touch with the outside world again, speaking to a non-detainee was great; special thanks to Helen from YW Befrienders, and Megan and Cat from SOAS. There were multiple impacts of detention on me, I can mention a few. One of the greatest impact is physiologically, I

was so emotionally torn by the fact that such (detention) facility exists today in Britain, it shall be the greatest shame for that nation, synonymously to what Guantanamo Bay is to America. My health deteriorated or I was severely malnourished during my stay, my menstrual cycle stopped for 6 months. The food they served in YW was incomparable to even dog food, at least dog food is savory. Insufficient protein source was supplied, there would be '1' thin slice of ham in salad, each meal loaded up on vegetables and carbohydrates. I was constantly hungry, no 'seconds' were allowed, or no one dare to ask for it, detainees who worked in the kitchen described that more food wastage was allowed than given to us. I spent my money on purchasing peanuts and cans of tuna to boost my daily protein requirement. Pregnant ladies can only get 1 cup of milk in addition to a regular meal for maternal nutritional enhancement. The last impact is, I refuse to believe in justice, I was never treated in the realm of fairness, the Home Office ignored the truthfulness of my case, I was being judged with a coloured eye. I cherish freedom so much now, I would not jeopardize my life, I value every second I have with family.

14. My removal date from YW or UK was on 18th January, 2014. 4 Serco escorters accompanied my return, including 2 females. My ordeal did not stop there, I faced more interrogation and suffer from my government as soon as I landed, even until today, people whisper when they hear my name. It doesn't matter how bad my detention experience was, it is all in the past now...my life goes on! What important is, this chaotic system of detention must be standardized, an order must be called upon to structure, innocent people should not be locked up, those who have committed crime or fraud should. When Britain overtly publicizes its generosity on saving the life of Malala Yousafzai (I have nothing against her, this is an example), made her a modern heroine, what an unfair contrast, as the society accepts her tragedy while denying the truthfulness of our stories. Everyone deserves a brand new life while the old one is despicable, human freedom is the most basic living source to human right, if freedom can not be provided, what good is air and food for?