

Inquiry into the use of Immigration Detention

Written Submission of Evidence

Introduction

1. I am originally from Iran. I arrived in the UK in 2009, fleeing torture and persecution. I didn't choose to come to the UK: my human trafficker made that decision. When I left Iran I didn't know about all this asylum rules and applications, I just ended up in the UK.
2. The date when they detained me was 5th November 2010. I spent three months in Harmondsworth detention centre.

Arrival at Detention

3. I had previously been in Ireland, in Baleskin immigration centre that provides accommodation for asylum seekers. You can move around, and there is a bus to the city. They had a good medical centre there. I had tried to make a claim for asylum in Ireland, but I did not know about the Dublin II regulation and when they took my fingerprints they found I had already a claim in the UK, so they sent me back to the UK.
4. When I arrived in Heathrow, four or five immigration officers came to arrest me from the air plane – they showed me my picture, and asked if it was me. I said of course it is me. They arrested me in front of the people on the plane - in that time I felt so shy, so embarrassed. They used handcuffs. When we came towards the terminal, they used a hidden door to move me away from the passengers and took me straight to immigration control. There the officers came to fingerprint me. They asked whether I wanted an interpreter or lawyer. I didn't know about my rights at the time and I didn't know that I could make a fresh claim then, so I said, 'No'.
5. The officer who interviewed me at that time told me that I was detained because I broke their trust. I wasn't supposed to leave the country, but I did. He said, 'We trusted you, but you broke this trust'. I asked why I was being detained. He said that, because I broke their trust, because I left the country, a judge had given me removal directions and I had to go to detention. They filled out form, gave me a

copy and said, 'Here it says the reason why I detain you: we need to do an interview with you and make further investigation about you'.

6. I didn't say anything at that time because I didn't know about my right. I didn't complain or say anything then. Straight away they moved me to a van and the van took me to Harmondsworth. We arrived in the night time.
7. When I was in Ireland I was being seen by a psychologist and a psychiatrist. They knew about my problems and had given me tablets to deal with them. I had five tablets at that time: one for sleeping, because I couldn't sleep very well. I used have an issue with anger, and I could get angry very fast – there were tablets that could make me cool down and control my anger. Other tablets were for depression. At that time I had lots of tablets, enough for one month, which the doctors in Ireland gave me. The doctors had also given me a leaflet about Spirasi, an organisation that particularly works with people who have survived torture. I had an appointment with them, which my psychologist made. Unfortunately it was on the same day as they deported me - so I missed the appointment. But at least I had the tablets.
8. When I arrived at Harmondsworth, they took all my medicines away. You're not allowed to take them inside, I think to stop you trying to commit suicide. They took all the tablets and wouldn't give them to me. I had interview with nurse that same night I arrived. I explained that I have lots of mental problem, I couldn't sleep, I got angry, I had depression and so on. The nurse said I couldn't take the tablets in. That very same night, I said, 'You should at least send a fax to Dublin and let them know I am here. You can ask them about the medication and let me take them'. He said I can't do anything, I'm sorry, and referred me to the other immigration officer.
9. I was so angry at that time. I explained to them, that even if they don't want to give me the tablets for the whole night, then they could have given me just one set, just for tonight. The nurse that she didn't know what the tablets were for, and when I said, 'If you don't know, call the health group in Dublin, the medical centre will help you', she refused me. Three time I asked, three times she refused.
10. They then moved me to the room, in F wing. It looked like a prison, with two persons in the room. I was so angry, I couldn't talk, I couldn't sleep – I didn't even eat.

Conditions in Detention and Access to Services

11. Immigration officers are never there in detention – you have to book an appointment. They come into your room to give you a monthly report but then they disappear again and will not answer your questions, they say they are too busy, that you need to book an appointment.
12. Security guards, they do not ever really answer your question. Many of them would always be frowning. There was one lady who was good, but I can't remember her name. The other security guard I worked with, she was so serious. You could see she was thinking that you were a criminal. Whenever she asked anything, she would not wait but was shouting at you to get an answer. When I would ask to go to the library she would shout, 'I don't know! You have to wait!'
13. The quality of the food is horrible. It reminded me of being in prison in Iran, but even worse. I don't understand why they waste time and money to cook food like that. But you have to take that food – when you are that hungry you have to eat it, you don't have any option. Sometimes they would give us an apple or orange – I would eat it instead of the meal, but it was not enough, I would be hungry again. On Sunday breakfast was good – it was halal English breakfast, turkey. I only took food on Sunday morning, and then I went to service for church.
14. In F wing, I could not eat the food. One day, one older security guard came to me and said, 'I am watching you, I see that you don't eat'. Then he referred me to medical centre. The medical centre is also so horrible: even if you were dying they would just give you the same tablet – paracetamol. And just the lower dose. There are not enough people at the medical centre, so you have to wait for at least 1 hour 30 mins just to visit nurse, not even to see the doctor.
15. I explained my situation to the nurse and members at medical officer, why I was anxious, could not sleep and could not eat. The nurse she just said, 'I will fax to Dublin'. Two times I went to see them to ask, and both times she said 'I will fax Dublin'. But they never gave me any of my tablets at all throughout those three months. Throughout those three months, it was just more sufferings. I remember one day that many people got flu all together. The immigration officers did not tell this to anyone outside the prison, they just ignored it. People went to the medical centre but it was overcrowded. Everyone had a cough and bad headache. I thought I was going to vomit, the flu was so serious. Some people had throat infections and needed antibiotics – but medical staff just gave them paracetamol. It was near chaos because people were so ill. People were suffering so much and being

ignored, so they started to punch the glass and mental barrier between us and the nurses. Immigration security came, and took those people away. I had a high temperature, my body started to shake – I don't know why they gave us paracetamol.

16. The dental service was even worse than the medical centre. My roommate had an infection in his gum, it was like his face was decorated it was so swollen. They just gave him paracetamol. They refused to fill any teeth for people, they just took them out – I got told they did not have a specialist who could kill nerve. I never need dental care, but I saw many people had problem with dental group.
17. In night time the air conditioning in winter was on. Instead of making it warm they would make it so cold. Under your blankets you were shaking, as the blankets were so thin.
18. The cleaning, the showers, were so horrible - you didn't even want to go to wash when walls and floor were like that, so horrible, with mould there and there.
19. I got to know the person in my room – he became a friend. He also had been in prison and had experienced lots of torture. And just imagine, you have both been in prison and now you are there again, in detention. It is a prison. Same tall walls of prison, they remind you again and again of where you were in your country. And they give you no support only more and more suffering. Three times I thought about suicide, but all the time my friend said, 'Think about your wife and son, you are not single and you have to think about them. Don't do it, please'. It was such a horrible time. I was not there for four years, five years, like others – my friend was there for six years. But three months in detention, even one day is a bad experience.
20. They have English classes, but you cannot access them easily in the detention centre. You have to be on the waiting list for a while. I did not even know they were there until two weeks after I arrived - someone told me, you can go to class if you like. I went and said, 'I want to come to class'. They said, 'Here is the list, the waiting list. Here is your name – you are the last one on the list'. I asked why they did not have more classes and they said they did not have any more teachers to teach – just one teacher for the whole of Harmondsworth.
21. The other thing was that the internet was so low. You could not open any social network – Twitter, Facebook. Sometimes they even blocked the emails. How are you meant to send information to your solicitor? How can you check your email and see a message coming from you solicitor or your family? People need to

access email – we were not terrorists there, we were just migrants. Another man had been there for 10 years, he told me. He said that immigration officers and security guards were so scared that someone could shared information about what was happening in detention, which was why they filtered it.

22. The information you receive in detention is so poor – it is horrible, you can't imagine. I was in detention for two weeks when another detainee said, 'Have you requested to get a solicitor? If you don't request it they won't give it and you will be there for long time'. The Immigration Officers never told me that you had to request a solicitor – many detainees didn't know that detention had solicitors, until the other detainees told them. There is no information about your rights, no way to find out what you should be getting.
23. I did not find out about getting a lawyer until my friend asked me whether I had one. When I said I didn't know, he told me to the immigration rooms and ask for list of solicitors. He was a good man, my roommate. He came with me and brought the list and we went through it together. He explained that all of them were not good firms, but that you have to choose the bad from the worst. Duncan Lewis was bad, he said, but not the worst. He then helped me to fax a letter to Duncan Lewis. One week later, they called me on a Friday and made an appointment for the next Monday. They came and took statement. But they did nothing for my release, they just made a fresh claim and did not even try to get me out. While I was in Harmondsworth, the Home Office refused the fresh claim straight away.
24. In detention, they give you a report every month on your case, a progress report to detainees. Once, they issued me removal directions in detention. I showed it to my friends, who said, 'Oh no, you're going to be deported'. And I said, 'they can't, because I don't have any documents'. I did not know then that if you do not have documents, they have to contact your embassy to take a list pass. If they want, the embassy will issue a list pass for you. Friends in detention asked, 'Did you give them documents?' I explained, no, the Iranian government had taken my passport. The immigration officers never brought me to the embassy. I received removal directions but I did not have any deportation order. I was so worried about this.
25. I did not know that there was a detainees support group or visitor group. I did not know you had to write your name on the list to go. There was no information: most people were like me, they didn't know. Even detainees did not tell each other, because they assumed that other detainees knew. One time my friend got up early

and went out, he was gone about three hours. I asked where he had been, and he explained he had been with the ex-detainee visitor group and they gave me phone card to call Iran. I said, 'Why you didn't tell me!' I did not know about them. This was near to three months in, so I never saw them at all. I had had no information about them, there was no information on the wall. Immigration officers told me nothing about that the group.

26. There was a chaplain service that you could access with no problem. The chaplain was such a gentlemen. A person of the church, he was really good and he helped people so much in detention. He helped me to contact people who were in my previous church in Manchester. He explained to them where I was, and they really wrote a strong letter for me and sent it to the detention centre. He also wrote to the church in Dublin and found an Iranian person there who knew me. He said that he knew something was wrong, because had I missed church on Sundays. That man also sent a very good letter for me. The chapel was very really good, they give you clothes if you don't have, they give you books and every day we could go to bible study for one hour or one hours and half.
27. I was baptised in detention. I had discovered Christianity when I met a good priest as soon as I arrived to the UK in 2009 and had converted then. I went to church regularly in the UK and in Ireland. However, because I had not been baptised and only was baptised in detention the Immigration Officers did not believe me.
28. That gentleman who found the solicitor for me, eventually he said he would send meeting request to Medical Justice. By that time, I was near to dying, because for some time I couldn't sleep very well, I couldn't eat very well, and was just eating fruit.
29. From F wing, which like a high security prison, they moved me to C wing, where it was a bit better. You cannot go out in C wing, but at least you could go into the back yard. Every detainee is smokes. Even some of them who did not smoke before, started smoking. It is hard to keep yourself healthy, there's too much stress and lots of bad behaviour by the security guards. Even small things give you stress. They issue a card on your first day and put payment on it. For shaving you have to give them card and they give you one plastic disposable razor. When you have finished you have return it to them to get your card back. They are so worried about people deliberately cutting themselves – and some people did before I arrived.

Release from Detention

30. Once, I was sick, they came at 4am and said, 'Let's go to the airport'. I refused to go with them. The second time they came was around the time of the big flu. They saw how sick I was, and left. The next time they came, they said, 'We have to go. Collect your stuff'. I asked where we were going, if they wanted me to bring all my belongings. They said, 'If you don't want your stuff, then don't pick it up. We're just going to fill in a form'.
31. They had a plan for me: they had tried to contact the embassy to take a list pass, but the Iranian embassy did not do it to give them, because they do not cooperate with the Home Office. So, the Immigration Officers put a form in front of me and said, 'If you fill out this form, you are released. If you don't fill it out, you have to stay here'. I said, 'You are forcing me to fill out this form for my release'. So I said no, and that I needed my solicitor there and if they weren't there then I wouldn't fill it out. Another detainee had told me, 'Don't ever sign anything – and only if there is a really good interpreter there'. I asked an interpreter. He came and told me that this was my emergency travel documents to deport me to Iran. I knew I should not sign it. But I was so tired of detention.
32. They put me in a corner. At that time I didn't have any option. They said, 'sign and you will be released, or else back to detention for you'. I was so tired I wanted just to get out. And so I signed. They took me to Terminal 5. They released there, with no support, with nothing at all. I said, 'I'm not going, please call the police'. They said 'No, we can do nothing for you, and nothing about accommodation, because you have signed to say that you know you have nothing to claim. They said, 'Your fresh claim was refused, so we can do nothing'.
33. So there I was. Heathrow was closed because of the snow. It was closed for three days. I saw people sleeping on the floor and I didn't know what was going on. The interpreter gave me ten pounds, and said, 'At least make a phone call to your friend'. I was near to crying, They just released me without anything. I didn't know anyone there or anyone in London. I had no money, and no ideas how I was going to look after myself. It was so scary. I remember just suffering so much.
34. I made a call to Manchester, because I didn't know anyone in London. I explained to my friend, 'They released me, but the weather is so cold, what should I do? I

have no money'. 'Stay there', he said, 'Go back to Heathrow, where it is warm inside. I will call to my friend, he will come and pick you up'. After two hours his friend came, called the number and he found me. He took me to his house. I had no luggage with me because they had told me back in the room that I was just filling a form. It was Christmas day.

35. After two days, I called Chaplain. 'Where have you been' he said, 'We had a plan for Christmas, you had a bible reading'. He said, 'Don't worry, I'll try to find your luggage'. I went back to Harmondsworth and waited four hours for my luggage. I don't know why they made me wait, when everything was packed to take already. Then I took my luggage and went back to my friend's house.

Impact of Detention

36. I was referred to the Helen Bamber Foundation because of my torture. When I shared my story of detention with the doctor, he said, 'I'm so sorry – if someone would have arranged for you to see a psychologist or psychiatrist in detention, they would have helped you. Immediately they would have got you the proper medication and they might have been able to argue for your release'. In detention, it makes you suffer much more if you have been in prison before or tortured. You remember all of that situation in your country and it makes you have flashbacks. All the time in detention, flashbacks of the torture came to my mind.

Recommendations

37. This country keeps people in detention for too long a time. For people who are not criminals even three months is too long. And there is no time limit. It's not fair and you do not know how long you could be there – if in Belgium, they can keep you for a maximum of only two years, then they have to release you. Here there must be a limit, a number of months.

38. I also think detention have missed something. We need an independent group who can monitor, who visit once a month without any notice, just coming in and speaking to people. We need someone with the power to enter, visit services and stop the security guards from doing wrong. The problem with the Independent Monitoring Board is that they give notice when they are coming. One day in

detention the food was really good, everything was clean, people were laughing and smiling. I was so surprised. Next day it was normal service. I said to a friend, 'Do you remember we had really good food yesterday, next day, it was horrible'. He explained it was because the monitoring team had come, but I never saw them.

39. We need more organisations like the ex-detainee group and detainee visitors group to ask people what is going on. We also need to have public notice boards with all leaflets and information publicly displayed, so everyone can know what is there. Many people were like me, and did not even know that you can have solicitor.