

Inquiry into the use of Immigration Detention

Introduction

1. I came to seek sanctuary in the UK from Sri Lanka.

Experience of immigration detention

2. I was in detention two times: both times they took me from the reporting centre. First time they took me to the Gatwick Detention Centre, and the second time it was Harmondsworth. First time, it was really terrible – I had never had that experience, not since I was detained in Sri Lanka. I didn't expect that it would happen here in the UK.
3. I was in Gatwick for two months for the first time. I moved from different wings throughout the two months. The first time they put me in a single room – it was night time when I arrived. I didn't eat the whole day. I went to report at early morning, around 8.30am, they kept me there whole day in the Home Office until 5pm. There was some small food available – crisps – but I didn't eat because I was feeling anxious.
4. At 5pm, when the office closed, they took me down to the van and to detention. Once we arrived, I stayed in the van for one hour while the driver was submitting documents. There were three of us in the van. They took us from there to the check in. They did checks, photographs and fingers prints and everything – it was too much, and I was so tired. I had no idea what was happening.
5. They gave us some clothes and towels in a bag. They took my phone and gave me theirs, and finally put me in a new wing, for newcomers. There were rules of the detention that we had to learn. They put me in the cell on my own – just bed, TV, open toilet and that was it.
6. When the door closed, I was feeling so dirty and so hungry, that I asked them, 'can I go to have a bath and get some food, I'm hungry'. At least I needed some water. They said, sorry, the dinner time is over. I pleaded with them and eventually they said, we have some coffee in a packet, you have to come out to get hot water to mix it. I had the coffee and that was what I had the whole night.
7. I can't forget my first night: I had flashbacks of my time in Sri Lanka and was crying out loud. I felt like when a boat is pushed under water, like I was drowning.
8. The next day, I got a call from Home Office and they took me to a high security wing. Again we went through all the checks, finger prints and so on, and into a room with other detainees. Everyone was there so sad, their heads were hung down. It was very miserable. It felt like being in a mental hospital, an asylum.
9. Only once I was there did they give me the detention decision, explaining that they were going to put me in detention: they said you can send it to your solicitor or anyone you like.

But then we had to sit and wait at the place until everyone else there was finished to go back - there was a long queue.

The conditions in immigration detention, including your ability to access services such as legal advice, healthcare, pastoral support

10. Health care inside Gatwick Detention Centre was not good. I was there with about 400 detainees but there was only one healthcare clinic. We could only access it 3 times. It was very difficult to get an appointment. They charged us £10 if we wanted to get a medical report. Some were rude, some of them were nice, but there were so many restrictions, it never felt easy. If you wanted to get medication, you'd have to wake up early. As soon as they unlocked the cell doors you would have to rush there, but even so there would be a long queue of people already. I saw some people who had been injured badly and others who were disabled, all just waiting. It made me sick. All these people were stuck in the same place, and some were very sick.
11. Just before I got bail from detention, I was in the isolation wing. It was horrible – there's no windows, it's full of dark and there is only one light. The officers were always keeping watch. If you wanted to have a bath, you had to wash with the door open and officers watching you. This is the level of control; I felt like if I wanted to breathe, I had to tell them, 'I will breathe three times'. That was how bad it was.
12. In terms of legal support, anything from the solicitor would take a long time to reach us, which made things very difficult – but anything from the Home Office would be there straight away. If you wanted to send a fax there would be a long waiting line and you had to wait for the officer to do it. I felt like a bird without wings – that is how it feels.
13. Luckily I got some help from Gatwick welfare team – I begged them because I really wanted to talk to someone who wasn't an officer. Every time I went, if I got the chance to speak to the Gatwick welfare team it would be very short and very difficult, because the officers were always there. You would be in a room, trying to share your feelings with the welfare member, and always the officer would be waiting outside, and he would be watching to see what was happening. As soon as your time was done – it wasn't very long – he would knock and say time over, time over, and you would have to stop.
14. I still have the memory of detention and I cannot erase it. It is still affecting me sometimes – I feel like it will be always in my life. I thought it was over because I was detained in Sri Lanka and had the worst, most terrible experiences, I thought I had left that – I didn't think it would happen here, and not twice.
15. At that time I didn't feel like eating because I kept on thinking about my life and what was going on. But if you don't eat, they make it difficult for you. They say they care about you, but they don't give any respect to your feelings. They would push on the door and say 'why don't

you eat' and call you a bad word. When I said I did not feel like eating, they would become angry and bang the door and never give me any peace.

16. One time, I still had pain in my wrist. I couldn't get up because I had a fever and I didn't feel well at the time. I did not hear the nurse when they were knocking on the door. The officer open the door and came rushing into the room, and came towards me. He grabbed the sheet near me – I thought someone was coming to hurt me so I screaming and I pushed him away. Straight away he grabbed my wrist and twisted it back, and got another officer to come. He grabbed my other wrist and twisted it behind my back. They pushed me to the floor and he put his knee in my back. Then he lied and said I was going to hurt him. I said, 'no no please, I'm afraid, don't hurt me'. They gave me medication that I had to take in front of them. The Home Office men then came straight way with a letter saying, you were aggressive with the officers. They straight away moved me to a room with nothing in it, no blanket at all, empty. It was January, very cold and I was so cold in that room without a blanket – there was nothing but rubber sheets there.
17. I lost weight in detention, about 7 kilo or 10 kilo.
18. They always make on that I am the only one like this. They always were asking me why am I acting this way, and telling me, why can't you be like the others, they are outside and happy see. But I was not the same as others, I'm a different person and we each have our feelings – I can't be like them. I did not want to be happy there because it reminded me of everything that had happened before, in Sri Lanka.
19. With the officers, it was like they just had to finish their work, they didn't care about us. Once, when I hadn't been eating for some time, they brought a dish full of chips and put it in front of me. They said I had to eat. I was scared and afraid that if I don't eat they would hurt me. So I just tried to force down three chips – then they wrote a note down that 'he ate', and went away.
20. If we went to health care... I do not know if they were doctors or who they were. I was with psychiatrists and others, just speaking to them and trying to tell how I was feeling. They said, we can do nothing, everyone seems like you here, we can't help. I was there to talk to them but they said, 'there's nothing we can do to help your case, everyone is in your position and we can't help you', and other things like that.
21. When I received the deportation letter, I was in the room alone, I didn't expect that it would happen again to me. I had to find help to stop me being sent back. Every day I got a letter and had to find a way to stop myself from being deported. Again and again it would happen, again and again I would be running around trying to save my life.
22. One time, I had a deportation letter and legal aid dropped me in the last minute – I had to find someone to help me suddenly. My mind was like it was being squeezed, officers were around always asking questions, asking why I was inside the room, and using bad words. It was too much pressure. I ran to health care and knocked hard on the door and said please

help me. The doctor came and he asked me what was wrong and started to cry and cry and cry. What did the doctor do? He then called the officers. They put me in a solitary room. I went for help to him but he phoned the officers and they put me in solitary - I didn't expect the isolated room, it was horrible.

23. There was one other guy, a neighbour in isolation. I didn't know who he was – every night I heard the sounds, he would throw bottles and bang on the wall. He could not speak even, and still they locked him in. I was next to him, and it made me even worse to hear that every night. I felt like I was in a mental hospital or something like that.
24. Wherever you are in detention, you can't ever be on your own, there's always eyes on you. Even when you get an appointment with the legal team, your solicitor, you have to go from the wing to the place. It takes about ten minutes to walk.
25. One time, I was ill and needed help to walk. I asked the officer who was walking with me whether he could help me and I could hold his hand. He called me bad words and said I had to walk. I was crying because I was so ill, I felt the pain in my knees and I was on medication for it. I begged him not to say that word in front of me, because it made me feel so bad, but he didn't care. He called me bad words, said I have to walk fast and that he can't be with me the whole time.

Further information about immigration detention

26. I'm giving this report so it doesn't have to happen to anyone else. We are human beings. There are people who are fighting for the rights of animals, but even would not treat them like that. We are human beings, we have feelings and souls, and I call on the UK to please respect the feelings of people in detention, who are people too. Everyone has their life and their dreams. I that know some people in detention did wrong, and it all depends on the situation, but there are better ways to manage this situation. There's no need to put people in cells.
27. People seeking sanctuary - we aren't criminals, we are trying to save our lives. Why do you have to bring the worst back, why do you have to remind us of the suffering we went through before, when we are just trying to save our life? I feel like it is sin. I really care about people – this should never happen for people. Everything becomes too much: the sounds of the boots, the sounds of the keys, the sounds of officers laughing, banging, shouting – the queue, the bell, it is all too much for anyone. You are stuck there in detention: you cannot fight, you cannot fly. It feels like being a dead body.
28. The stigma of being in detention, it follows you. In the community, even with family, people think that I have been in prison. I don't usually get the chance to be in the community, but when I do go, straight away people start to say that I've been in prison and start to talk. I don't know how I'm ever going to erase that.