

Felicity Brangan

17<sup>th</sup> September 2014

Dear Members of the Parliamentary Inquiry on detention, C/O Jonathan Featonby,

Re: Felicity Brangan's testimony to the Parliamentary Inquiry on detention.

My name is Felicity Brangan, I am a British citizen born in Salford, England. Until the 8<sup>th</sup> April 2014, I had no idea of the reality facing detained asylum seekers (as I suspect most of the population have not). This issue again highlights the plight, suffering and hardship facing asylum seekers in this country.

I am delighted that an all party group is giving asylum seekers, their families, friends and supporters the opportunity to recount our experiences of the detention system. I thank you for your commitment to this issue, in helping the voiceless have a voice. I hope our testimonies and recommendations can inspire positive change to this system through your political recommendations and your place of influence in my parliament.

My hope and dream is for a change of political heart, that my country will be a place of real sanctuary, safety and support for the most vulnerable people on the planet. And why not? - with empathy, compassion and love we can achieve anything.

Mine is a story of an outsider looking into this system which I can hardly believe exists in my country, being carried out in my name, by my elected representatives. Through my connection with for City of Sanctuary (Manchester) a charity welcoming asylum seekers and refugees, I met a Sudanese doctor.

He fled on the point of death from the Sudan seeking sanctuary in my country. He is an innocent victim who was persecuted in his home country for defending the poor and the sick. He worked as a doctor in the biggest hospital in the Sudan in Khartoum (parts of this hospital has now been closed). As chairman of the Workers Union at the hospital, he spoke out against the poor working conditions of the workers and the regime's wishes to close down the hospital (this is now reported in the media to be happening). He was imprisoned and then tortured by the authorities for 24 days. He later escaped Sudan and sought sanctuary in this country in December 2012.

After his appeal was denied (March 2014) he was evicted and left destitute by the state. At this point, I offered him a place to stay at my home on the 25<sup>th</sup> March 2014.

### **Pennine House**

On the 8<sup>th</sup> April, he was detained by the Home Office and sent to Pennine House a detention centre at Manchester airport.

He was reluctant to talk about conditions he faced at Pennine House and we feared that conversations in the visitors' room may be listened to. We didn't want to discuss the conditions or staff in any negative way to influence their treatment of my friend.

Pennine House was difficult to locate the only information was its location at terminal 2. I asked many members of staff in terminal 2 the location with no success; I eventually asked a security guard who knew. No free parking was available and the cost was about £18 for the two and a half hour stay. We were allocated half an hour slot per visitor so two visitors together each booked an half an hour slot so we were able to visit our friend for an hour. Only two small rooms were available and the spaces were booked up promptly. We quickly worked out the best solution to call as early as possible, 6am, and to book two half an hour slots for each visitor to see the same person. I think it would be much more difficult for others with English as a second language to work out the most accessible way to see their visitor.

On our arrival, staff were overly official informing us we were about to enter a government building. I suspected there was an aspect of power play by the guard, I believe there was no need to be so authoritarian and more empathy towards visitors would be more appropriate for the situation. Another member of staff was initially unable to identify a refugee card as a suitable form of photo ID stating he had never seen 'one of those before' which is incredible working at a detention centre. This incompetency resulted in an unnecessary moment of stress as my friend thought his ID was unsuitable and so unable to see his friend. When inside I was frisked by a female member of staff who complained to me that she had been enjoying a 'nice cup of tea and had now been disturbed'. Another member of staff this time over the telephone was unable to spell my friend's surname when she wanted to book an appointment time. She had to resort after spelling it out several times to state 'it is the thing you drive with an extra 'r', her surname is 'Carr''. It is farcical even comedic but unfortunately this calibre of staff were responsible for the wellbeing of my friend through a traumatic period in his life.

I am not sure what to suggest for this level of poor spelling and incompetency. This raises the issue of poorly paid, poorly trained and poorly educated staff. This is a real concern when human rights are privatised and accountability and responsibility is taken away from the government and given to the lowest price tender such as Serco Group PLC.

The visiting cell was small and cold. The walls were concrete and a wooden plane formed a bench and the back was the cold, concrete wall. In the room were only two items, in one corner many laminated smiling cartoon faces stating 'be happy' and the procedure about how to complain in many different languages. My Arabic friend said the Arabic version was poorly translated/written. The second item was a picture of a world map. What is the reasoning behind such items, the beginning of the war of attrition to frighten and traumatise the detainees?

### **Colnbrook**

### **Flights back to the Sudan**

On the 10<sup>th</sup> April, the Home Office booked a flight to return my friend to the Sudan on Sunday the 13<sup>th</sup> April 2014. On the 12<sup>th</sup> April he was transported to Colnbrook, here he stayed in a single cell know as the 'first day or last night stay room'. This simple act highlights the cruelty and psychological harm being inflicted on asylum seekers and known previous victims of torture.

He was afraid to seek bail because he believed this might exacerbate the Home Office into booking another flight sooner rather than later.

Four flights were booked and cancelled, he refused to board the first flight, stating, "I left my home country in fear for my life and refuse to be returned there to be tortured again. The Home Office and the courts have decided that they do not trust me and believe me to have no credibility. My claim is 100% true and as a former human rights activist and a person of ethnic minority in Sudan, my life will be in grave danger should I return, and this is a guaranteed fact."

The second flight was booked for the 3rd May but was cancelled that morning through the intervention of Ivan Lewis MP raising concerns to the Home Office regarding this case. A third flight was also cancelled on the evening of the 29<sup>th</sup> May as an adjournment on his oral hearing for permission to receive a Judicial Review was granted that same day. Fourth flight (12<sup>th</sup> August) was cancelled as my friend was unfit to fly. He is a diabetic (a condition he did not have before seeking asylum) and was incorrectly injected by medical staff at Colnbrook and needed to be hospitalised because of this incident.

I cannot imagine the daily psychological distress going through that process must entail. On a personal note I lived very closely with these events. We said goodbye on three separate occasions both believing this could possibly be the last time we spoke to each other. All other aspects of my life seemed trivial and unimportant when his life was endanger and flights seemed eminent.

### **Visiting Colnbrook.**

I visited Colnbrook on two separate occasions. Staff on the whole were professional towards me. Except on my first visit, I went into the wrong entrance and a guard was rude, aggressive and unhelpful to me. The walls are surrounded by barbed wire. Walking up the visitors' stairwell were badly drawn cartoon characters and at the top a black silhouette of an African woman and baby. This lonely figure was not very comforting to me. The visitors room was large, open with no private areas. I was only allowed to take in two pound coins to use for the vending machines and my glasses case. Visiting hours were from 2pm to 8pm and I was allowed to stay as long as I wished. On my second visit, my friend was physically unwell and I could see a mental deterioration.

### **Conditions in Colnbrook for detainees.**

My friend rarely talked about conditions inside Colnbrook, I think to protect me for what he was really going through. At one point we did have to discuss conditions and his physical

and mental health when I referred him to the Helen Bamber Foundation. He would also occasionally tell me certain truths about the conditions he faced.

Living conditions are poor and on several occasions he received unclean bed linen and washed his sheets himself. His shared cell had no door on the toilet facility and no privacy was possible on the toilet. The shared toilets were dirty and during his detention he became physical sick, suffering from a heavy cold, sinus problems and a prolonged virus.

On one occasion I know about he did not receive a personal letter sent to him.

He did not receive an important fax, I sent him, a medical appointment to see a GP with Special Interest Psychiatry from the Asylum Seeker Mental Health Consultation Service. He was unable to attend this appointment as he was in detention. Also access to the fax machine and communicating with solicitors through email facility was limited and stressful to access.

His mental health has deteriorated. He saw a counsellor several times in Colnbrook. The counsellor stated he needed to see a psychiatrist and told him he would see one. This promised appointment did not happen. He asked to see a psychiatrist upon hearing distressing news that a family member had been detained and tortured by the National Intelligent Security Service (NISS), they wanted to know my friend's whereabouts. He initially did not make this fact known even to his closest friends as he is terrified of the NISS's power to hurt his family. His priority is to try to protect his family back in the Sudan. This left him in an impossible situation here was conclusive proof his life was in danger should he be 'removed' to Sudan yet by seeking evidence of this fact would possibly place his brother in further danger and be difficult to ascertain. We discussed this issue once and then he forbade me from mentioning it again. I know this placed him under extreme mental torture.

He also needed hospitalisation when he received poor medical attention at Colnbrook. He suffered from erratic sleeping patterns, panic attacks and severe nightmares. At one point he become withdrawn from his close friends, unable to receive or make telephone calls and for a period of time he stopped all communications altogether.

The traumatic, psychological damage and mental torture being inflicted on my friend by the Home Office is inhumane and unnecessary. He has committed no crime but was locked up with convicted criminals. He is an innocent victim who was persecuted in his home country for defending the poor and sick. He fled from the Sudan seeking sanctuary in this country. Throughout he has endured a lack of dignity and respect.

### **Life after detention**

He was released on the 14<sup>th</sup> August but given no reason for this.

He was detained for 128 days. He had been claiming asylum for 22 months. He has a strong case and strong evidence but was disbelieved by the Home Office at every step. If only somebody in the Home Office had made a sensible judgement early on, instead his case has gone to the highest court in the land. The legal bill for the Home Office (and British tax payer) in this case alone must be immense.

After his release, he is not the man I knew, he is withdrawn, unable to communicate with his friends, he is emotional, feels deeply that he is now a burden on his close friends and consequently wants to be isolated and is distant and remote from us. Has the system finally managed to break his spirit, destroyed his life? At this moment in time I believe that to be the case. Before this period in prison, he was studying English through an organisation dedicated to training asylum and refugee health professionals to gain appropriate English and medical examinations in order to work for the NHS. His teacher told him he was the one of the most able student and was achieving high grades in his examinations and making excellent progress.

Now he finds it difficult to concentrate, he is unable to study or even focus on limited reading.

He is a man of great personal qualities, compassionate, caring, charismatic, intelligent, has strong leadership traits, and as a human rights activist has a notable interest in the world around him and the plight of others, even when he was detained. Now he tells me that he is living a fearful life, a life in limbo. This period in detention has sent him over the edge, he knows people who have been detained on 5 separate occasions, others waiting twelve years before achieving refugee status and he is afraid this will be his life as well. I believe he, maybe suffering post traumatic stress also feeling depressed and anxious.

What choices face my friend, being forced to board a plane going back to a country where he believes he will be killed, face unlimited time in prison or be released and face destitution while his claim is decided upon?

In many ways my friend is lucky, he has had consistent and committed legal representation. His solicitor has performed a wonderful service and believes totally in his client and wants to do everything in his power to help him. My friend has been in this country since December 2012 and has strong links with the Sudanese community. And through his outgoing and charismatic personality has many friends from different backgrounds who want to help and support him. He is intelligent and has excellent spoken English skills.

But what about the others? – for example, over half the detainees in Colnbrook do not have legal representation, they may have poor English, have no links to local communities and be friendless and alone. It has to be our responsibility to protect these people and give them sanctuary.

### **Recommendations – to the Parliamentary Inquiry**

We have lost our way regarding asylum, asylum seekers and refugees make up a tiny portion of the migrant population. If I had only one recommendation for the Inquiry it would be to restore humanity and compassion into the asylum system.

This could be achieved through:

- Closing down detention centres. I do not understand why we would imprison anyone who had not committed any criminal offence. I do not understand why we would imprison somebody for seeking sanctuary and safety in this/my country. As well as this being morally abhorrent, it is economically foolhardy, costing the British taxpayer almost £50,000 per person per year.
- Treating asylum completely separately from other aspects of immigration policies and procedures.
- Give asylum seekers the dignity of work. It seems very counterproductive not to use the talents and skills of people seeking asylum, especially highly educated medical or teaching professionals. So allowing asylum seekers to pay taxes and contribute to our society, instead of a policy of non inclusion.
- Take away targets and allow each case to be treated with fairness.
- To look at the whole process, to investigate the 'Policy of Destitution' employed by the Home Office.
- Simply to look at the legal vocabulary used to describe the process of asylum claims. Is it used intentionally to take away humanity? Flights back to the Sudan where my friend literally feared for his life are described as 'Removal Directions' and the Home Office issues 'Return Policies' when describing the fate of human beings. As if one was moving house or returning unwanted clothes back to the retailer rather than human beings. This is not necessary. I received a letter via my MP Ivan Lewis from James Brokenshire MP, Immigration and Security Minister, stating:

Please be assured that returns to Sudan are only undertaken if the Home Office is satisfied that the individual has no protection needs. The UK Government maintains the country's proud tradition of providing protection to those who need it in accordance with its international obligations.

I do not feel proud but utterly ashamed that in my country the Home Office is failing the most vulnerable people on our planet, the destitute fleeing persecution coming here to seek sanctuary are being imprisoned and treated like criminals when we should protect, shelter and help them.

Yours sincerely  
Felicity Brangan