

Philippa Paine

Re: Immigration Detention Enquiry.

I have been a regular visitor at Dover IRC for two years now. I have visited 18 different detainees from 12 different countries. I have visited under-age detainees, who should not be there and I have visited torture survivors who should not be there, which flouts the home office's own rules. Many of the detainees I have visited have been in one or more other IRC's before arriving at Dover. "Removal centres" as I understand it are supposed to be for people being imminently "removed". How come then, have some detainees been there for years? I generally spend between an hour and two hours per visit and the longest period I have visited an individual for, is once a week for four months. As neutral visitors, unconnected with the legal system or the border agency, we have unique access to the individual being detained, giving us valuable perspective on the cost of detention on the human being. We are often the only visitor the detainee sees and can talk with freely. We are there to listen, to be supportive and non-judgemental. Without exception, my visits have been tangibly appreciated.

I feel strongly that indefinite detention is severely inhumane to the individual not to mention financially costly to the country. There is not one single detainee I have visited who is not suffering from some degree of depression, sometimes profoundly. The following are universal; sleep problems, headaches, fatigue, anxiety, fear and fear, along with various other manifestations of general ill health and exacerbation of any pre-existing conditions. When serving a prison sentence, the prisoner has a date in mind when they will be released. A detainee being detained indefinitely, lives with uncertainty and an unknown future in many ways and I don't think the effects of this can be underestimated. If any one of us were living in this way for weeks, months and sometimes years, along with real fear of being returned to a hostile or dangerous country of origin we may have fled from, we would all be suffering from health problems; emotional, mental and physical.

In addition to the above, common practical issues experienced whilst in detention, as related to me by detainees, are as follows: long periods locked up, different rules in different IRC's (such as access to the internet) unhelpful and disrespectful guards, requests for health assessments being ignored, unacceptable quality of food (particularly during Ramadan) insufficient portion sizes whilst watching extra food being wastefully scrapped, poor access to legal representation; particularly since the complex and savage legal aid cuts and random decisions relating to the outcome of bail hearings, such as being turned down many times and then suddenly being successful with no changes in circumstance in between, which leads one to think, why were they turned down before?

I would like to highlight circumstances of two particular detainees I have visited. I will not mention identifying details or the reasons why they were detained as this is irrelevant to my points about the effects of their detention.

- 1) A man with a wife and three small children, who had been living in this country for many years, was detained for nearly three years in total. His youngest child was born during the beginning of his detention. His wife was left struggling financially, suffering the inevitable depression and anxiety which, results from isolation and poverty and the loss of support from her husband. She was unable to manage the cost and other difficulties of visiting him as she lived many miles from Dover. The prolonged detention, and family separation, impacted directly on the detainee, the health of his wife and the development of his three young children. A year later the family exist precariously on minimal income and his case has still not been settled. Whatever the detail of his asylum claim, how can a decision possibly take so long?

- 2) A young man who is a Rohingya Muslim from Burma, with no family, entered the country from Bangladesh where he had lived since he was a young child. He was detained for two years following a year's prison sentence relating to entering the country illegally. If he had claimed asylum immediately on arrival, the outcome may have been different but he was scared and ill-advised. As you know, Rohingya Muslims are a stateless people, violently persecuted and unwanted in either of the countries mentioned above. After many failed attempts, he was granted section 4 bail in August 2013. For one year, he was electronically tagged and signed twice a week. He diligently adhered to his bail conditions, resisted the temptation to work illegally; surviving on the indignities and hardship of the £35 azure card. He engaged in voluntary work and attended ESOL classes and was described as having 100% reliable attendance and proved to be a valued asset to both groups. Whilst signing this August, he was suddenly detained again, being served with a refusal order at the same time as a deportation order, with only four days' notice before the booked flight. This shockingly short notice denied him any time to access solicitors or any right of appeal. He was not allowed to collect his few but important personal belongings, including vital paperwork relating to his case. Had I not been able to visit him and bring him clothes and some cash at the IRC the night before the flight, he would have been put on that plane in the same clothes he had worn for those last four days and with £7 in his pocket. It transpired that the decision to deport him had actually been made in February. He was in fact deported to Bangladesh by this country, on the same false papers he had admitted he came in on as his Rohingya origins had not been believed. On arrival in Dhaka, he was interrogated for many hours and finally admitted with a piece of paper, not really worth the paper it was written on. He is now adrift in Bangladesh, with no Border ID, which means he cannot access legal work or accommodation. He remains stateless. He has already been harassed, persecuted and imprisoned, just for being Rohingya. What will become of him? As a British citizen, I am appalled and ashamed.

To conclude, I feel there must be a better way. Whilst I realise, immigration matters are hugely complicated and there has to be restrictions. I have yet to meet a detainee who came here for spurious reasons and I want to be proud of living in a country who treats asylum seekers and refugees with compassion. These are not illegal immigrants, they are exercising their legal right to apply for asylum. Indefinite detention achieves nothing but suffering and the process is a shambles. The financial cost of keeping each individual in detention each week is immense. These are people who could be working, contributing and living rather than simply surviving, whilst their cases are being decided.

Yours Sincerely

Ms Philippa Paine

P.S I give permission for my views to be used in your enquiry but if published, request anonymity.