

CAMPSFIELD MONITOR

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Campsfield detainees protest again

On Wednesday 20 August 1997, yet again (see *Campsfield Monitor* No.s 8 and 10), detainees were removed from their rooms in Campsfield in the early morning, without warning and for no clearly stated reason. A detainee who asked Group 4 for a reason was told that it was because they were 'not well disciplined'. Another detainee surmised that it was because one of them had complained about the food on the previous day; complaints seem to give rise to removals, which is why detainees often say they are 'too scared' to complain about mistreatment by Group 4. Since 1993 at least 35 Campsfield detainees have been removed to Winson Green, Rochester and other prisons, usually on the basis of accusations by Group 4.

On this occasion one of the two who were removed, a Gambian asylum seeker aged 17, was woken at 6.30 am and moved to the segregation unit at Campsfield, where he spent the day. He claims that in this process he was 'strangled' and received wounds to his face. He was then moved to Wormwood Scrubs prison, where he spent one week before being transferred again, to Haslar detention centre. (Also his belongings, which included valuable items, were not taken with him and he has not recovered them). The other detainee, a Nigerian, was taken to Haslar; he was deported on the 18th September. When the Group 4 team came for him at Campsfield at 6.30am, he resisted and he was removed with considerable violence; his shouts woke other detainees who saw him pinned to the ground and thought he was being strangled and was 'going to die'.

Immediately after this, there was a major protest. There was a good deal of damage, windows were broken and the telephones and computer system, according to Group 4, were put out of action. Fires broke out in various parts of the building, including the canteen, the gym and the library. The government claimed the damage amounted to at least £100,000. In addition, around 50 or 60 detainees succeeded in getting into an outer courtyard, forced open another gate and nearly succeeded in gaining access to the main gate.

During the morning and afternoon several hundred police (including special riot police), horses, dogs, a

canteen and numerous vehicles and buses arrived from different parts of the country. Some police marched up to the gates in military-style formation, chanting. Group 4 guards, who arrived from Durham and elsewhere with riot equipment, were sent in to reinforce the guards inside. The police, including heavily armed riot police standing on the roof of a Land Rover, surrounded the camp to prevent escapes.

Other riot police went into the outer courtyard, next to the main entrance, and were issued with small round shields. In the late afternoon, these were replaced with full length shields and the police lined up in front of the gate to the courtyard where the protest was taking place, apparently ready to charge. However Group 4 negotiators, brought in from elsewhere, persuaded the detainees to abandon their protest and to return inside. During the day police also went inside to question all the detainees, including those who had taken no part in the protest. Some of them (see below) were taken to police stations to be questioned further.

At 8am Group 4 had told detainees to pack their belongings and go to the visitors' area, where they would be 'protected'. About 100, who wished to avoid involvement with the protest, did so. They remained there until 5pm when an immigration officer appeared and said that those whose names were called must come for interview. They were then told they would be transferred to other prisons. Altogether 98 people were moved out of Campsfield. Group 4 maintained that they had asked to be transferred 'for their own safety', but the detainees we have spoken to say this is not the case. They were desperate at finding themselves in prisons when they had not committed any crime nor participated in the protests at Campsfield. One of them said: 'This is a prison. My head is going to burst. I cannot bear it'. His papers had been left behind at Campsfield; he was in the midst of a difficult appeal procedure.

The Home Office said that detainees were transferred to Rochester Prison, Tinsley House, Harmondsworth and Haslar; they did not confirm or deny reports that some were moved to other prisons, including four to Wormwood Scrubs. Two weeks after the protest, some were returned to Campsfield. The authorities say that

'consideration will be given' to returning the others, once repairs to Campsfield have been completed. By November 1997, the numbers detained at Campsfield were still little more than half of the previous 200.

Aftermath of the protest: a punitive regime

The 50 or so protesters who had been in the courtyard, and others who had not been involved in the protest (about 100 altogether), remained at Campsfield. Many of them, including women, spent two nights sleeping on the floor of the Visitors' Centre. They were not allowed to change their clothes or wash for five days; according to one account this was so that they could be identified on the video cameras. Most of those left behind were black Africans or Caribbeans. It was some days before their possessions were restored and when they were, money and other valuables were missing; Group 4 said this was because of looting by protesters, but detainees believe this was logistically impossible.

They were then locked into their rooms. If they needed to go to the toilet they had to knock on their door and were accompanied by a guard; some were kept waiting for so long (up to 30 minutes) that they wetted themselves. Time in the toilet was restricted to 30 seconds and time in the showers, when it was eventually allowed, to two minutes. For eight days they had to collect their food and eat it in their rooms. When the canteen reopened, they were allowed out for meals but only for 30 minutes. They were also taken out, in organised groups, accompanied by guards in riot gear, for two periods of two hours a day, either in the yard outside or in the Visitors' Centre; during these periods they were not allowed to remain in their rooms. A Home Office press officer denied that detainees were ever locked in their rooms. But the evidence that they were is detailed and widely corroborated by detainees and their visitors and supporters.

For a time the food was inadequate in *quantity* (as well as quality). Detainees received one slice of bread, one egg and a plastic mug of milk for breakfast and a small bowl of rice for lunch, and there was no tea or coffee. Visitors reported that detainees had visibly lost weight.

New staff were drafted in, some of them from a private prison, and were said to have been even more 'openly abusive' and to have sung 'insulting racial songs'. They were 'very noisy', so that people had difficulty in sleeping. Detainees were frightened and exhausted.

Neither social nor legal visits were allowed until nearly two weeks after the protest. Subsequently visits were allowed by appointment only and restricted to 2-5pm

and 7-9pm. Incoming telephone calls, even from lawyers, were not allowed at all for a similar length of time. For nearly two weeks, contact with lawyers was therefore possible only by letter and (incoming only) fax. Cases had to be postponed and at least one detainee lost the chance of a bail hearing. Deportations took place without people being able to contact their lawyers. A Home Office spokesperson said this was because telephones had been ripped off walls and lawyers' meeting rooms had been damaged. Incoming calls were subsequently restricted to 10-11.45am, 2-4.45pm and 7-9pm, and to two minutes' duration. Outgoing calls were not allowed, to lawyers or others, for a considerably longer period. Although in theory detainees could request Group 4 to contact their lawyers for them, there are cases in which lawyers attest that no such contact was made.

Government response

The government has so far condemned the protesters, with no recognition of the suffering that had driven them to their protest, and expressed complete support for Group 4. On the 20th August Mike O'Brien, Home Office minister in charge of immigration, issued a press statement thanking 'those involved in bringing this disturbance to a close' and stating: 'I am appalled at this disruption and the police will undertake an investigation of any offences which were committed, and consider charges'. On the 21st August O'Brien 'inspected the damage'. He came out and said, among other things, that the detainees 'needed their heads examined', and that they should show more appreciation of the availability of colour televisions. He then issued a further press statement, headed 'BURNING BOOKS - IN A MOMENT OF MADNESS', which read as follows:

I wanted to go to Campsfield to assess the damage and thank the police and others involved in successfully quelling the disturbances.

Campsfield is not a prison and the detainees are unconvicted. It is a secure hostel with a relaxed regime. A relaxed regime depends on the detainees abstaining from abusing it. The detainees destroyed their own facilities.

The detainees' library was gutted. It had taken four years to put together, with a variety of books in different languages. Yesterday in a moment of madness the detainees burnt their own books. The women's area was damaged and so was the laundry. Other areas seem relatively unscathed. The damage is roughly estimated at about £100,000.

The disturbance was firmly quelled and the police are now investigating whether to bring criminal charges against certain individuals.

O'Brien thus condemns all detainees for actions, particularly the burning of the library, whose circumstances remain highly unclear and which we know upset many of the detainees (some of whom in fact insist that some of the damage was done by Group 4 guards rather than detainees).

Subsequently criminal charges (first for 'violent disorder' and then for 'riot') were brought against a few of them (see below). Under the Conservative government, protests at Campsfield, including one on the 5th June 1994 in which there were similar levels of damage and loss of control by Group 4, gave rise to no criminal charges, although detainees were questioned by police. It appears clear that the current trial is a political one, desired by the government.

A joint request from the *Campaign to Close Campsfield* and *Asylum Welcome* for a meeting with Jack Straw, to express concern about the situation at Campsfield, first made in July 1997 and pursued after the protest, has received no reply or even formal acknowledgement.

13 charged with riot

Following the protest, some detainees were taken to Banbury police station to be questioned. The Home Office set up an incidents room, with facilities and funding which would normally be unavailable to the police. A few weeks later 13 people, including three minors, appeared at the magistrates' courts in Oxford, Banbury and Bicester and were charged with violent disorder under Section 2 of the Public Order Act (1986). This carries a maximum sentence of 6 months if the trial takes place in a magistrates court and five years if it goes to the crown court, which the lawyers expected it to do.

All except one of the defendants (who had been released on temporary admission and then granted refugee status) were remanded in custody, eight in Bullingdon prison, one in Reading prison, two in Reading young offenders remand centre, and one (who was not yet 17) in Feltham young offenders institution. All of them are male. There were two Jamaicans, two Liberians, one Ghanaian, one Gambian, six Nigerians and one Lebanese.

On October 17 they were all brought to Oxford City Magistrates' Court in front of Mrs O'Donnell and

Messrs Day and Pocock, and charged with violent disorder. The lawyers did not apply for bail and the defendants were remanded in custody. On the 7th November the 13 returned to Oxford magistrates court. They were then charged with both violent disorder and riot, under Section 1 of the Public Order Act, which carries a maximum sentence of ten years and must be tried in the crown court. The defendants were again remanded in custody, to appear at Oxford City Magistrates Court on the 28th November.

On the 14th November four of the defendants were informed that the charges against them were to be dropped. They were the two Jamaicans, the Lebanese and one of the two Liberians. They remained in Bullingdon and Reading gaols. Lawyers for two of them have started proceedings for wrongful imprisonment.

The remaining nine defendants are all asylum seekers from West Africa. The 50 or 60 people who broke out into a courtyard at Campsfield House on August 20 included all nationalities and both sexes.

Campsfield 13 defence campaign

When it became clear, at the beginning of October, that the 13 were to be charged, members of the *Campaign to Close Campsfield* found out with some difficulty who their lawyers were and invited them to a meeting in New College on the 13th October. Campaign members also visited most of the 13 in Bullingdon and Reading prisons and ascertained that they supported the idea of a public campaign in their defence. The October meeting was attended by five lawyers representing seven of the 13, seven members of the *Campaign to Close Campsfield*, the secretary of *Asylum Welcome and Detainee Support* (AWADS), and two other visitors to Campsfield detainees (including two of those charged). The meeting agreed on the principle of a defence campaign and exchanged information. The lawyers suggested the type of help from people in Oxford that would be useful to them, including the identification of potential witnesses for the defence. But it has become increasingly clear that it is hard to find defence witnesses willing to testify in court or to make statements, given their extreme vulnerability.

Lawyers continue to be interested in the idea of coordinating and information-sharing meetings. There was another meeting on the 30th October, less well attended but useful as a discussion of tactics. A more broad-based meeting has been called for the 4th December. As well as the defence lawyers, representatives have been invited from organisations in London,

including Amnesty International, the Refugee Council, JCWI, UNHCR, Justice, Asylum Aid, the Churches Council for Racial Justice and the Refugee Legal Group.

The Campaign has also organized demonstrations outside Oxford magistrates court and quite large numbers of people have then gone into the visitors' gallery in the court to support the thirteen.

Letter from detainees charged with riot

The following letter is from eight of those accused of riot on 20 August who are held at Bullingdon Prison in Oxfordshire. It was addressed to the *Campaign to Close Campsfield*, was received on 5 November, and was read out on that day at a meeting in the House of Commons hosted by Jeremy Corbyn MP to coincide with the lobby calling for the repeal of the Asylum and Immigration Act 1996 organised by the *ad hoc* November 5 Organising Coalition.

HMP Bullingdon, Bicester, OX6 OPZ,
2nd November 1997

Sir/Madam,

We the undersigned will very much appreciate it if you can lobby on our behalf for our case to proceed in court on the 7th November as planned. We are tired of the constant adjournments. We feel low and tired, locked up in prison, wondering how we could survive the daily torment, fear and mental anguish.

We have been stripped of our pride, dignity, freedom and future.

We have already been to court three times, without the trial commencing.

We are being engulfed by an uncaring, biased system, a system that dares to call itself justice.

It is bad enough being in detention under the immigration; during which we underwent stress, abuse, distress, mental torture, intimidation, fear and violence – mentally, physically and psychologically and the worst forms of human degradation in the hands of Group 4 security, for many months, without being treated like guinea-pigs. It is brutally unjust.

The police had since 20th August to gather evidence against us. If after two and a half months the persecutor still has not gathered enough evidence for trial to commence, it is only fair that the charge is dropped and the case thrown out of court, taking into consideration that most of us have been deprived of our freedom for periods ranging from 4 months to 17 months, for nothing.

If the case is to commence, we the accused want it transferred from Oxford to London. [*The request is not hereby made on the accuseds' behalf: The Monitor believes this is now no longer the wish of the accused.*]

It is amazing that in a country that practises democracy, and human rights law, we can lose our freedom for seeking asylum and then send to prison on the premise that we may have committed a crime, while the charge remains unproven, and the circumstances involving the alleged crime totally ignored.

Everything we treasure in life has been taken from us. Ours is a hopeless existence in this country. Is this our destiny – insecurity and fear?

We are sincerely grateful for the good people out there for their friendship, compassion, commitment, and encouragement that has sustained us through all these testing months.

God bless you all for your efforts.

Sincerely

[signed by eight of the accused]

Future events

Demonstrations at Campsfield: noon 29 November '97, 27 December '97, 31 January, 28 February, 28 March 98

Campaign to Close Campsfield Meetings: 7.30pm at 60 Great Clarendon St, Oxford, on 9 December 97, 13 January, 10 February, 10 March 1998

Demonstrations outside the court: ring 558145, 726804 or 557282 for details or send email address to sant0098@sable.ox.ac.uk for regular mailings

Asylum welcome are planning a dayschool for the afternoon of 31 January 98. Ring 722082 for details.

Please send information for the
Campsfield Monitor to:

The Campsfield Monitor,
111 Magdalen Road, Oxford OX4 1RQ
Or tel: (01865) 558145 or 557282 or 726804
or email: 0098sant@sable.ox.ac.uk
Please include as much detail as possible
and your name and phone number

Would you like to visit?

There are four coordinators of visitors to Campsfield detainees, grouped around: English speaking Africans, French speakers, Spanish speakers, and the Indian sub-continent.

If you would like to visit a detainee,
the relevant coordinator can be
contacted via **Asylum Welcome**

Tel: 01865 722082

RESOLUTION TO SUPPORT THE CAMPSFIELD 13

This (organisation) _____ notes that:

1. On the morning of 20 August 1997 at Campsfield Immigration Detention Centre in Kidlington, Group 4 personnel forcibly removed two detainees from their rooms, without due notice, to be taken to prison. This prompted a spontaneous protest by other detainees.

2. Similar removals in the past have led to protest amongst detainees at Campsfield, including the 50 hour roof-top demonstration and hunger strike during May 1997.

3. Such protests are a justified response to the wrongful mass detention, throughout the United Kingdom, of innocent asylum seekers whose only 'crime' is to flee persecution. This racist practice is condemned by many local organisations such as Students Against Campsfield and the Campaign to Close Campsfield, and condemned nationally by migrant organisations, human rights groups, national trade unions, the London Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, the Joint Council for the Welfare of Immigrants, Amnesty International, and the November 1996 conference on detentions held by the Churches Commission for Racial Justice.

4. No procedure exists in the United Kingdom whereby detainees, individually or as a group, can make complaints to an independent tribunal about the conditions in which they are held (conditions which were condemned by Chief Inspector of Prisons Judge Tumim in 1995), or about the fact that they are detained at all.

5. Charges of riot and violent disorder have been brought against 13 of those who were detained at Campsfield at the time of the protest. (Three months later, the charges have been dropped against four of the detainees – on 14 November 97)

6. By contrast, no criminal charges were ever brought against detainees protesting under similar circumstances in the past at the time of the Conservative government.

7. A fair trial is doubtful given the biased media coverage of the case and the comments by Home Office Immigration minister Michael O'Brien on the day after the protest.

Therefore this (organisation) _____ resolves to:

1. Write letters to the following:

Jack Straw, Home Secretary,
Queen Anne's Gate, London W1

and

The Director of Public Prosecutions,
50 Ludgate Hill, London EC4M 7EX

to the effect that all charges against the Campsfield 13 are unjustified and should be dropped.

(Please send copies to Close Campsfield Campaign, c/o 111 Magdalen Road, OX4)

2. Make a donation of _____ to the Campaign to Close Campsfield (Send cheques to Close Campsfield Campaign, c/o 111 Magdalen Road, OX4 1RQ)

3. Publicise, and where possible bring banners to, future demonstrations outside the court and outside Campsfield in support of the detainees to demand their release.

Send a message of support to the accused!

Please send messages of support to the nine detainees who are still waiting for trial. They need all the support we can give. Fleeing from imprisonment, torture, and death to seek safety and asylum in Britain, they have been greeted with detention and now remand in prison.

They come from Nigeria, Ghana, Liberia and the Gambia. They range from teenagers to middle age men. Two are minors. They are all black. Already they have been held in detention for six months to two years, and none of them is certain when this detention will end, even if these criminal charges are dropped.

They are being held in HMP Bullingdon, HMRC Reading and YOI Reading. We are protecting their identity in case they are deported back and face again the dangers they fled. We will forward your messages promptly.

SEND TO: *CAMPSFIELD MONITOR*,
c/o 111 Magdalen Road, Oxford, OX4 1RQ