

# LIBERTY

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## **HARMONDSWORTH – The Full Story**

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On 28 November 2006 a report by Chief Inspector of Prisons, Anne Owers, on the Harmondsworth Immigration Removal Centre was made publicly available. The report concluded that Harmondsworth “was not performing sufficiently well against any of our tests of a healthy custodial environment” and described “an over-emphasis on physical security – which was more appropriate to a high security prison than a removal centre”. Mrs Owers was shocked at the treatment of men who were detained for immigration reasons only, not because they had committed any crime.

The report also contained disturbing statistics - over 60% of detainees said that they felt unsafe at Harmondsworth, and 44% said that they had been victimised by staff. Further, it revealed:

- Lack of systems for dealing with the risk of self harm by detainees
- Institutionalised misuse of the ‘privileges’ system - particularly to remove access to faith provision
- Routine strip-searching of detainees in solitary confinement
- A ban on physical interaction with visitors except at greeting and farewell

Mrs Owers confirmed that this was the poorest report she had ever issued on an immigration removal centre.

On the evening of 28 November 2006 a group of detainees at Harmondsworth were watching BBC news in their television room on A-wing. Allegedly, when the news started reporting on the damning report by Anne Owers, the staff attempted

to prevent the concerned detainees seeing what was being said about the conditions in their centre.

Within minutes a disturbance had begun in Harmondsworth. Fires were lit, televisions and surveillance cameras smashed and water pipes broken. As the sprinklers came on the centre began to flood. Many terrified and confused detainees were evacuated to courtyards within the centre, where they waited in the cold for many hours without adequate clothing. Other detainees were locked in their rooms. While some managed to escape, others were trapped inside while fires continued to burn.

Eventually the centre staff were evacuated from the building and specially trained prison officers ('Tornado Teams') were sent in to deal with the situation. As the morning came, desperate detainees still trapped inside the centre courtyards were filmed by news teams in helicopters spelling out the letters "S.O.S." with bed sheets. But the truly shocking story was the treatment of detainees inside the buildings.

One detainee, David<sup>1</sup>, was trying to find a dry place to sleep when a Tornado Team forced him into a two person cell with four others. They were locked in and left for almost 13 ½ hours while the disturbance carried on around them. David told Liberty:

"The air conditioning and ventilation system had broken down so there was no fresh air at all in the room. The room was like a sealed can because there was no airflow into or out of the room. The room became very hot and we felt we could not breathe. To make things worse, there was a smell of gas but I did not know where it was coming from. It felt very dangerous in there because there might have been an explosion if the gas was ignited...I felt scared, terrified and degraded because I did not know when I was going to be let out of the room. People were crying, screaming and shouting for their lives."

Richard\* was locked into a cell with eight other detainees for 9 hours:

"There were electrical wires hanging down from the ceiling to about chest level. This was terrifying because we did not know which ones were live with electricity and which ones were not...We were screaming and shouting to get out. We

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<sup>1</sup> Real names have not been used in this article

needed to use the toilet but could not leave the cell. There were officers drinking coffee downstairs but we could not get their attention. They treated us like animals and did not care about us. We were forced to urinate in the corner of the room onto the floor and to defecate inside the closet.”

Abdul\* is a diabetic. He too was locked in a room and abandoned for hours:

“I kept knocking to attract the attention of the Prison Service officers because by this time I badly needed my insulin. I kept banging and shouting that I needed my medication and saying that I was not feeling well, but no-one could hear me as they appeared to have left the wing. I was hungry and this makes me feel worse. I felt dizzy, shaky and sick. At times I could see through the spyhole in the door that Prison Service officers had come back to the wing and were walking along the corridor, but when I banged and shouted to tell them I was unwell, they ignored me.”

Fighting the dehumanisation of asylum seekers and defending their civil and political rights is a campaigning priority for Liberty. Perhaps the most dehumanised asylum seekers of all are those who are held in detention centres across the country, often for months or even years while they wait to be removed from the UK or simply to have their claims heard.

Liberty spent many weeks seeking evidence from detainees caught up in the Harmondsworth disturbance. As more evidence came to light, it became clear that something had gone terribly wrong at Harmondsworth. While the staff at the centre, and later the prison officers, obviously needed to contain and control the disturbance, their disregard for the safety of completely innocent detainees appeared remarkable. When the events of 28 November 2006 were considered in the light of the Anne Owers report published that very day, Liberty recognised that a bright light needed to be shone into the dark recesses of the immigration detention regime. The mistakes and ill-treatment that had led to such desperation amongst detainees that the disorder took place, just 28 months after another such disturbance, and the appalling mistreatment that occurred during the event, must never be allowed to happen again.

In May 2007 Liberty wrote to then Home Secretary, John Reid, demanding a full public inquiry into the disturbance and into the appalling way in which detainees had been treated for the months and years beforehand – as exposed by Anne Owers. We included witness statements from detainees like Richard and Abdul,

showing that by locking these men into crowded, flooded cells with limited air for up to 24 hours, by leaving them in terrible fear while fires continued around them and by denying them access to food, water, medicine and toilet facilities, the Harmondsworth and prison staff had subjected them to inhuman and degrading treatment in violation of Article 3 of the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR). Article 3 requires that credible allegations of inhuman and degrading treatment be effectively, independently and publicly investigated.

Unfortunately, and perhaps predictably, the response from the head of the Border and Immigration Authority (part of the Home Office) was that they did not consider a public inquiry to be necessary. They pointed to the internal report on the disturbance already being produced by former Home Office employee, Robert Whalley. That report, now published, is 123 pages long. Just four pages deal with the question of detainee welfare.

Acting on behalf of four men who were detained at Harmondsworth when the disturbance took place, Liberty is now judicially reviewing the Home Office for its refusal to hold a full public inquiry. Whether we will get permission to pursue the judicial review is likely to be decided at a High Court hearing in the next few months. The mistreatment of some of the most vulnerable members of our society should not simply be swept under the carpet. Lessons must be learnt so that those who come to the UK seeking protection from persecution are not met with further abuse.