

The Campsfield Monitor

Newsletter of the
Campaign to
Close Campsfield

May
2002

www.closeCampsfield.org.uk

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Campsfield to Close!

"I can also confirm that I intend to close Campsfield House. This outdated centre is no longer appropriate in the 21st century. These places will be transferred to the new high-standard removal centres." David Blunkett, Home Secretary, speech to the House of Commons 7th Feb 2002

The unexpected announcement came amidst the Home Secretary's speech unveiling the new white paper on Asylum and Immigration. The Campaign, now in its ninth year, of course welcomed the news to the extent the closure will mean one fewer detention centre and "Oxford's Shame" (Oxford Mail) will be no more. However, in the context of Blunkett's speech advocating increased detention capacity, it was clear from the outset that this did not represent a softening of the government's policy of detaining asylum seekers.

As a BBC report pointed out, the "controversial" centre has been "dogged by problems", including "riots, fires and hunger strikes" which have broken out at Campsfield since it opened in the mid-90s. Could it be that Campsfield is one problem that Blunkett is no longer prepared to deal with? Close Campsfield's Bill Mackeith said, "The closure decision is most likely to be down to the continuous protest from inside and outside Campsfield."

It certainly looks like that, so the decision is useful for future campaigning against detention!"

The Campaign also pointed out that new, bigger detention centres are being opened and more innocent refugees and other migrants are being detained (Yarl's Wood: 900, Harmondsworth 550, Dover 400). The new generation of mega detention centres, Yarl's Wood (which prior to the recent fire was Europe's biggest) and Harmondsworth may have bigger gyms but they are still prisons, with even tighter security.

They are still an abuse of the basic right not to be imprisoned if you are innocent or not charged with crime. Detention is increasing not decreasing, with all the clinical depression it causes among detainees, the despair and powerlessness it engenders, and the racist thoughts words and deeds this act of state racism engenders in the UK population.



If Campsfield is "outdated" (the reason being given for its closure) then most of the other detention centres should be closed too as they are older (some were built in the nineteenth century!).

Dr Evan Harris, Liberal Democrat MP for Oxford West and Abingdon and long-time critic of government detention policy, said: "This is a mixed blessing. Many people will be glad to see the back of Campsfield House as a symbol of the Government's oppressive, irrational and unnecessary detention regime for refugees. Campsfield House has had a chequered history, including two highly critical reports from two successive HM Chief Inspectors of Prisons, Judge Stephen Tumim and Sir David Ramsbotham. Many people in the area see Campsfield House as a symbol of an unreasonably harsh approach to refugees. A significant number of those refugees now work in our schools and hospitals. Unreasonable detention of asylum seekers is an unnecessary cost to the taxpayer."

Following the events at Yarl's Wood (see page 10), which deprived the Home Secretary of almost one quarter of his promised places of detention, Campsfield House is at full capacity. The government has announced that the centre will close by the end of April 2003 and that this will not be affected by the fire at Yarl's Wood. In fact, the recent fire at Yarl's Wood has prompted insurance companies to refuse to insure detention centres run by Group 4, so this may force Campsfield to close even earlier.

The Campaign to Close Campsfield will continue to demonstrate outside the centre on the last Saturday of the month as it has done tirelessly for 8 years. The Campaign still has much work to do if we are to prevent the Government's cavalier approach towards refugees: we suspect this will not be the final edition of the Campsfield Monitor.

Protest Works!

Detainees, most of the time, bear their imprisonment with extraordinary fortitude. Nevertheless its bitter injustice has led in many cases to severe depression, to listlessness and despair, and in some cases to suicides and suicide attempts. It has also led to a series of protests, hunger strikes and attempts to escape.

There have been hunger strikes in practically every other refugee prison, but they have not been on the same scale as at Campsfield. And, until Yarl's Wood, there were no mass protests elsewhere. In addition, outside Campsfield, protest has been sustained for over eight years. The May 25 demonstration will be the 100th and there have been camps, marches, letters calling for the freeing of detainees from Oxford university professors, support for individuals from Asylum Welcome, and much media coverage of the "notorious" Campsfield. It is impossible to avoid the conclusion that all this was, in reality, the reason for the government's decision to close Campsfield.

Escapes

Before razor wire was added to Campsfield's high fences, there were over a dozen escape attempts, some of them successful. Although the razor wire appeared to make escape impossible, two Indian refugees threatened with deportation, astonishingly, attempted it; one severely gashed his legs; the other fell on his head and was in hospital for many weeks. In January 2002, just before closure was announced, five Romanian refugees escaped successfully (see page 4)

Hunger Strikes

Early in 1994, after some asylum seekers detained at Pentonville prison had won release with a hunger strike, ten Algerians, including one woman, went on hunger strike at Campsfield and were eventually freed. This was followed by a mass hunger strike, in which 180 of the 200 detainees at Campsfield took part. At the beginning of the strike several of them broke out into a courtyard and climbed on to the roof, where they could communicate with

demonstrators outside. Others in other detention centres and prisons followed their example. After

several weeks 15 of the Campsfield hunger strikers described as "ringleaders" were removed to Winson Green, Bullingdon and Blakenhurst prisons. Some were put in

isolation cells and all ended up on hospital wings. Two were put in

bare strip cells as suicide risks, deprived of all their belongings including books and toothbrushes, given only an indestructible tunic and left shivering on the bare floor, a method of physical prevention of suicide which has since been ruled inadmissible. They eventually abandoned their hunger strike

without being released. Since then there have been several more hunger strikes at Campsfield, none on so large a scale; the latest was in September 2001.

The May 25th 2002 demonstration will be the 100th and there have been camps, marches, letters calling for the freeing of detainees... It is impossible to avoid the conclusion that all this was, in reality, the reason for the government's decision to close Campsfield.



**Outside Campsfield
in November 1998**



Group 4 donned their riot gear, numerous police and extra guards were brought in, and, so the government claimed, a further £100,000 of material damage was caused by detainees. Mike O'Brien, Home Office Immigration Minister, issued an inflammatory press statement headed "BURNING BOOKS - IN A MOMENT OF MADNESS", ignoring the fact that library facilities were burned by one individual who was never identified by the authorities. "The detainees", he said, "destroyed their own facilities". Ten West African young men were charged with riot, and acquitted (see page 4).

Protests

On 5 June 1994 a mass protest followed the summary removal for deportation of Ali Tamarat, an Algerian. His friends climbed onto a roof to protest; others came out into the courtyard. During a long night they caused material damage which the government claimed amounted to £100,000. Group 4 left out a ladder which was used by six detainees to escape; a seventh was badly injured when an immigration officer pulled the ladder from underneath him; later detainees recaptured the ladder and another five people escaped. Group 4 fled and barricaded themselves in their offices. Riot police were called. One of the Algerians on the roof was seen jumping, head first, off it. The Home Office admitted only five serious injuries. Twenty-two detainees were dispersed to various prisons. Some of the Group 4 guards who run Campsfield have since been equipped with riot gear.



In May 1997, when an Algerian falsely accused of sexual harassment was removed to Winson Green prison, his friends, after spending the morning "talking and talking", decided to climb onto a roof to demand his return. They stayed on the roof all night and most of the next day, with a little food and some blankets passed up to them by detainees below. About one hundred other detainees, refusing to be locked into their rooms, broke out into a courtyard and were eventually locked into another wing. Extra Group 4 guards were bussed into Campsfield in riot gear. Eventually the rooftop protesters were forced down by the cold and the rain. They were transferred to Winson Green, Rochester and Tinsley House.

On August 20 1997, there was another mass protest, triggered by the early morning removal of two West African detainees. One of them was ill, resisted and woke everybody with his cries of pain. The detainees who saw his removal thought he was being strangled, and demanded to know why the two were being removed. Eventually nearly all of the detainees were outside in the courtyard protesting and displaying placards saying they were not criminals.

*Beside the first
Campsfield Protest
Camp in May 2001*



A further protest took place at the end of 2001, when detainees reacted angrily to the refusal of immigration officials to meet them to respond to their grievances. A fire was started. Some detainees were removed to Yarl's Wood, where they were further traumatised by the much more severe fire of February 14 2002.

***The closure of
Campsfield shows that
protest works.
Celebration will be
possible when all
immigration
detainees, who are
now in greater
numbers and worse
prisons elsewhere, win
their freedom.***

Campsfield: News and Updates

In general, the immigration service seems to have adopted a policy of moving detainees from one holding centre or prison, to another, often at very short notice and at difficult times (eg. one man in Campsfield was woken at 3am recently to be moved). No choice is given and usually no explanation about why. Immigration detainees are being sent to prisons on a regular basis again now in spite of Blunkett's assertion that this practice was "shameful" and would be stopped. Visitors are finding more cases of severe depression than previously and are concerned that treatment available to detainees is inadequate.

Campsfield Protest Camps

The campaign has organised several illegal protest camps near Campsfield's main entrance, on grassland owned by the Ministry of Defence, visible and accessible to families and other visitors.

The latest was a three-week 'No Borders' camp in the summer of 2001 (in solidarity with European No Borders Network camps on the Polish-German border, on the Spanish border with North Africa, and at Frankfurt airport). Campers painted FREEDOM on walls, one of them inside the outer razor wire fences, and systematically changed all the road signs to Campsfield 'House' to 'Prison'. The police searched unsuccessfully for bolt croppers and paint, and made two arrests when campers disrupted Group 4's shift change.

In July 2001 the Wombles planned a mass camp, advertising its intention to break down the fence, but were stopped by a huge police operation. We plan another, one-week camp, at an undisclosed destination leaving from the 25 May demonstration. Bring sleeping bags and tents! The European No Borders Network is also organising a camp at Strasbourg, the site of the Schengen Information System, on July 19-28.

Contact: www.noborder.org

2002 Campsfield Protest
Camp: Noon Sat 25th May

Five Escape

Five Romanian asylum seekers escaped from Campsfield Immigration Detention Centre in January 2002. A police search helicopter, twenty-one officers and two police dogs were brought in to search the surrounding area when the five were discovered missing. A hole in the perimeter fence was discovered, leading investigators to believe that they received outside

assistance. The Home Office Immigration Department confirmed the escape. Bill MacKeith,

Spokesperson for the Close Campsfield Campaign and President of the Oxford Trades Union Council, expressed his support for the five:

"We are glad that five of the wrongfully imprisoned detainees are now free." He also added: "I personally am sorry that the rest of them did not escape."

Brown Knows but

In a press conference in Washington, Gordon Brown said the budget contained a higher growth prediction because net immigration was higher. This also meant that tax increases could be £2 billion less.

Chicken Pox Outbreak

A large number of detainees in Campsfield House caught chickenpox in July 2001. Some of the detainees that caught the disease were removed from Campsfield, and the Home Office stopped sending asylum seekers to the centre until the outbreak was over.

Campsfield 9

After the mass protest at Campsfield in 1997, nine West Africans were picked out and charged with riot, which carries a ten-year maximum sentence. The Campaign to Close Campsfield organised a defence campaign and at the trial lawyers were able to show that virtually all the Group 4 witnesses had concocted stories and told lies, and that they had themselves been responsible for some of the material damage complained of. Eventually the prosecution dropped the case, saying that it 'was based mainly on eye witness statements' by Group 4 guards, and that: 'No prosecution properly conducted could or should invite a jury to convict on that evidence'. Some of the Nine are suing Group 4 for malicious prosecution. The proceedings grind slowly on.

Home Office Pays Compensation to Algerian

Lawyers Bhatt Murphy have successfully sued the Home Office for wrongfully imprisoning an Algerian for three months after they were in possession of all the information which enabled them, eventually, to grant him refugee status. This makes a mockery of the assertion that people are detained at Campsfield because the Home Office have evidence that they will abscond. The Home Office, presumably wishing to avoid publicity, settled out of court. 'Aggravating circumstances' of the case were that the Algerian, who had complained to Group 4 and immigration officials that Group 4 were showing pornographic videos in the room next to the one in which detainees were praying, was transferred with three others to Winson Green, a high security prison in Birmingham. He spent three months in Winson Green. The four were accused by Group 4 of setting fire to a toilet, an allegation which the Home Office had to admit was baseless.

Bail for Immigration Detainees

Bail for Immigration Detainees (BID) has been campaigning for bail rights. Automatic bail hearings were provided for in the 1999 Immigration and Asylum Act, but never implemented. BID is very alarmed by the increasing number of detainees held under Immigration Act powers (there will be 4000 detention places by Spring 2003).

Detainees are entitled to apply for bail so that they may live at liberty while their asylum applications are processed, but there is no automatic right to a bail hearing. In BID's experience there are considerable obstacles to obtaining release from detention and basic procedural guarantees that would ensure protection from arbitrary detention are not in place. As a result, people who have committed no crime, including children and vulnerable adults with mental and physical health problems, some as a result of torture, are being deprived of their liberty and held indefinitely in detention.

Since BID was set up in 1998, we have made over 500 bail applications and campaigned against arbitrary detention, the use of detention for children and on issues such as the requirement for sureties. BID is supported by charitable trusts, individual donations and support in kind from volunteers and pro bono advocates. Trained volunteers undertake case work and administration, and there are five paid staff.

BID has offices in London, Gosport and Oxford. The Oxford office deals with detainees at Campsfield. BID Oxford opened last year and has had lots of success lately. Three people recently obtained Temporary Admission (this is better than bail, as it involves no reporting restrictions) and 2 were bailed in our best week so far! One who was granted Temporary Admission was only 16 years old but Immigration Services didn't believe him. He is now staying in Oxford and being supported by Oxfordshire Social services. Another to get Temporary Admission was a Zimbabwean who has been in detention since arrival, which was 16 months ago. He is a Christian and has spent Christmas for the last two years in detention.

For more information on BID,

Email: bailforimmigrationdetainees@yahoo.co.uk.

Anyone interested in volunteering or offering local support should contact the BID Oxford Office on Tel 0845 3304536 Fax 0845 3304537

Asylum & Immigration: the big picture

Much has happened since the last edition of the monitor: too much to recount here in full.

Most notably on February 7 this year, David Blunkett announced that Campsfield is to be closed (see page 1) The Asylum and Immigration Act 1999, despite proudly bearing the official stamp of compatibility with the new Human Rights Act, contained a catalogue of human rights abuses. Amongst other things, it paved the way for a dramatic increase in the use of detention of asylum seekers, for the first time introducing a statutory power providing for the contracting and management of detention centres.

The detention of asylum seekers without reason and time limit is arguably a breach of the Right to Liberty under the European Convention on Human Rights and, in effect, also contravenes one of our own most basic principles of justice: a defendant is innocent until proven guilty. Unfortunately, loop-holes have been found or made to legitimize the detention of asylum seekers. Since 1999 a number of detention centres have sprung up all over the country including, with 900 places, the infamous Yarl's Wood. (see page 10)

The 1999 Act also introduced some horrendous logistical errors and outrages, (later virtually admitted by the government itself) including the dispersal of asylum seekers and the introduction of food vouchers.

One of Blunkett's first moves as Home Secretary was to end the voucher scheme, which singled out asylum seekers as "sub-citizens". Tales of humiliation abounded, such as the supermarket checkout cashier who refused to allow the assistance of another shopper trying to provide an additional few pennies to prevent an asylum seeker having to replace food after he had miscalculated the total allowed by his voucher. The dispersal system has asylum seekers as targets for racism following the dispersal of refugees into poor and predominantly white communities, culminating in the death of an asylum seeker in Glasgow last year as a result of a racist attack.

Government condemnation of racism following the Lawrence Inquiry appears to be yet another example of limp spin in light of the racism that inevitably flows from their insensitive and brutal asylum laws, and more recently the Home Secretary's comment that our schools are "swamped" with asylum seekers.

"Limp spin" is a tag that also applies to the new white paper, "Secure Borders, Safe Haven: Integration with Diversity in Modern Britain", published in February. A thin veneer of concern for the plight of asylum seekers and appreciation of the "diversity" they contribute covers a deeply disturbing tightening of the asylum process. The most alarming aspect of the white paper is the intention to establish four new "accommodation centres" (see page 8) with a total capacity for men, women and children. Those who do not stay overnight at an accommodation centre will find their cases jeopardized. Other major concerns include the abolition of automatic bail hearings to challenge the detention of asylum-seekers. Another clear concern - despite the welcome removal of food vouchers - is that the cash-based system perpetuates an unjust 'poverty-level' support provision roughly 30% less than that for non-asylum-seekers.

Perhaps most alarming of all is the absence of measures to address shortcomings in the asylum application decision-making procedure. In effect the paper proposes that the Immigration Appeal Tribunal will become a court of higher status. This will dramatically prevent the scope for review of its decision-making. In no other area of English law is this allowed. To create a system which assumes its own perfection is plain arrogant; to do so simply as a response to the frequency with which review is currently invoked is outrageous and demonstrates a cavalier approach to justice.

Many of the members of Close Campsfield Campaign and Barbed Wire Britain are opposed to immigration controls altogether. However, Barbed Wire Britain sent a response to the White Paper, proposing reforms to the Asylum system.

Summary of Barbed Wire Britain's response to the Government's Feb 2002 White Paper "Secure Borders, Safe Havens"

Barbed Wire Britain is a network of independent campaigns against detention of asylum seekers and migrants. (See page X)

Barbed Wire Britain opposes the use of detention as a tool of immigration and asylum policy. Its impact on the people detained is detrimental. Current policy is at best arbitrary and at worst racist. Detention worsens the perception of asylum seekers as criminals or illegal aliens. It places the UK in breach of international obligations. It contradicts other stated aims of immigration policy. It is expensive, being driven by private profit. Detention fails to achieve its stated ends. For example, the evidence shows no link between detention policy and the number of new asylum claims. Detention should be stopped.

We oppose the use of compulsion in providing services to asylum seekers through induction centres.

In particular:

- Asylum seekers who can secure accommodation with relatives or friends, should not have to leave that accommodation to go to an induction centre.
- There must be a clear statement that centres are a form of emergency accommodation only, offered to asylum seekers when non-institutional housing is unavailable. There must be no element of compulsion.
- There must be safeguards in place to ensure that newly arrived asylum seekers are not forced to complete critical interviews or decisions while exhausted by travel, stressed by flight, traumatised by the events which they have fled and disorientated by new surroundings.
- However, we welcome the proposal to provide health screening for new asylum seekers.

We criticise the proposal for **application registration cards** (ARCs) for its emphasis on the processing of asylum seekers as an inanimate material.

We believe that the UK should house all migrants in the community, to ease their integration into community life.

Accommodation centres are a derogation from that principle and should not be introduced. Barbed Wire Britain strongly opposes the use of compulsion in assigning asylum seekers to accommodation centres, arguing that:

- The option of "voucher-only" support must be retained. Many asylum seekers obtain accommodation with friends, relatives or charities, reducing demand for NASS housing, and pressure on communities and public services in NASS dispersal areas. It is made possible only by the voucher-only support system.
- Daily reporting is unjustified.
- Use of an accommodation centre must be genuinely voluntary.
- Accommodation centres must be located, designed and managed to maximise integration of asylum seekers into the community.
- Leaving an accommodation centre should not jeopardize anyone's case.
- There must be time limits on residence in an accommodation centre.
- Legal services must be readily accessible.

The proposals for extensively increased **reporting requirements** for all asylum seekers represent an enormous financial and emotional burden on asylum seekers. They ignore the rights and needs of refugees, treating them only as objects to be controlled, restrained, and processed.

On the issue of appeals, we welcome the end of "certification" and proposals to reduce delays in appeals. However, the White Paper wrongly assumes that it is asylum seekers who cause delays in the current system. We reject the argument for further changes to appeal rights based on use of the Human Rights Act by some refugees whose asylum claims had already been determined. We condemn the use of inflexible time limits, and criticise specific time limits in NASS appeals.

All elements of compulsion in attendance or residence at Oakington Reception Centre should be discontinued and the closure of the centre should be brought forward to occur as soon as other, non-residential, facilities for processing the applications can be provided.

We oppose the use of forced removal of asylum seekers who genuinely fear mistreatment in their countries of origin, whether or not that fear is shown to be for a Convention reason. We oppose the use of detention as a part of the removal process. The proposed repeal of the bail provisions in Part III of the 1999 Act should be reversed, and the provisions of that part should be implemented in full.

Barbed Wire Britain

The Barbed Wire Britain network was set up in January 2001 to:

1. respond to the great increase in immigration detentions and deportations by campaigning against present and projected places of detention
2. help set up new local campaigns near the places of detention
3. pool information and reports, and
4. develop higher profile national campaigning against immigration detention.

It was set up by local anti-detention campaigns with support from the National Coalition of Anti Deportation Campaigns (NCADC), Joint Council for the Welfare of Immigrants (JCWI), Committee to Defend Asylum Seekers, (CDAS), and National Civil Rights Movement (NCRM).

Barbed Wire Britain (BWB) is based on years of campaigning specifically against immigration detention, locally and internationally, including for example organising the Barbed Wire Europe conference held in Oxford in 2000 which brought together 160 people from 25 countries. This followed Europe Barbelée conferences in France in 1997 and 1998.

Britain locks up more innocent refugees and other migrants for longer, and with less judicial oversight, than any other country in Europe. BWB aims to highlight this and assist in building opposition to immigration detention on a European scale. It will participate in this July's "No Borders" camp at Strasbourg. It is also in touch with anti detention campaigners in the rest of Europe, and in the US and Australia.

Barbed Wire Britain has

- helped establish the new campaigns to close the Yarl's Wood and Dover centres. The Scots are campaigning strongly against the Dungavel immigration prison. There are campaigns to close other principal places of detention in the UK at Campsfield, Harmondsworth, Haslar and Oakington. Campaigns are yet to be established at Tinsley and Lindholm.

- worked alongside refugees and other migrants including present and former detainees to amplify their voice. Voices From Detention, on the BWB website and in print, is an example of this.

- held a three-hour first meeting with the House of Commons All-Party Group on Refugees on 11th March attended by 12 BWB representatives from the local campaigns. This resulted in Early Day Motion 1048 calling for a public inquiry into the 14th February events at Yarl's Wood and an end to deportations of detainee witnesses. The next meeting is on 22nd May.

- continued to work with local and national organisations such as trade and student unions, religious faith bodies, human rights and political organisations. Through this work now five national unions call for an end to immigration detention: the Transport and General Workers Union (TGWU), National Union of Journalists (NUJ), National Association of Teachers in Further and Higher Education (NATFHE), the Manufacturing Science Finance (MSF) section of Amicus, and UNISON. In September 2001 the General Council of the Trades Union Congress supported a motion from the TGWU calling for an end to immigration detention.

- held a national weekend of actions against detention last September 22-23.

www.barbedwirebritain.org.uk



+44 (0)1865 558145
+44 (0)1865 726804
+44 (0)1993 703994
+44 (0)7767 414714
+44 (0)208 571 5019

Barbed Wire Britain
17c West End, Witney,
Oxon OX28 1NQ, United Kingdom

Local campaign details on the website
or by phoning the above.

- jointly sponsored the Manchester conference in March in support of refugees

- jointly called the resulting week of action in Refugee Week this June, starting on the 15th with a demonstration at Harmondsworth (where a second 450-place detention centre is being built alongside the one opened last summer) and ending with a demonstration in central London on the 22nd, with round-the-country local actions against detention during the week.

- submitted a response to the Less Secure ... white paper on immigration, focusing on detention.
- produced two excellent banners which most recently accompanied a delegation of Dover and other UK anti-detention campaigners to Calais to join a demonstration against a new detention centre being built at Coquelle.

- produced stickers and leaflets-available on request.

- supplied speakers for meetings all over the country.

- received a pre-titles screen advert for BWB and a generous cut from film poster sales on the national tour of Ken Loach's new Film Bread and Roses

- sponsored the excellent new video Barbed Wire Beat about the campaign to close Campsfield.

*Britain
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in Europe.*

The New Jargon: Accommodation and Removals Centres according to the Home Office website

According to the Home Office, Accommodation Centres are to be distinguished from Removals Centres, which will be the new name for detention centres. Removals Centres are those such as Yarl's Wood where there was a fire on 14 February.

In emotive language, the Home Office describes Yarl's Wood as a "secure centre where we detain failed asylum seekers and illegal immigrants under lock and key before we deport them". In reality, the vast majority of people detained at Yarl's Wood and other detention centres have not had their asylum cases determined.

The Home Office goes on to claim that "Removals Centres have tight security - which will be toughened up in the light of events on 14 February - but they are very different from Accommodation Centres".

The Government is planning to set up four Accommodation Centres for asylum seekers. The Centres are a trial and together will provide 3000 places.

The Home Office has announced that one of these centres will be on land vacated by MOD Logistics, Bicester, Oxfordshire .

The Home Office claim that Accommodation Centres will make it easier to stay in touch with asylum seekers while their applications are under consideration. The new Centres will provide a wide range of services, including health care and separate education for children, who will not be able to go to local schools- so much for integration with diversity.

The Home Office says it will not place people in an Accommodation Centre who they think "might run away". As to whether asylum seekers will in effect be detained in Accommodation Centres the Home Office state that Centres "will have clear rules, and residents will have good reason to follow them.

Anyone who breaks the rules will lose support. Breaking the rules may also affect their claim for asylum" and that "people housed in Accommodation Centres will be free to come and go at will as long as they sleep there overnight." It would seem then that these Accommodation Centres are effectively open prisons.

The Home Office is also anxious to stress that "an Accommodation Centre will not be a risk to the safety of local residents". Accommodation Centres will house people who "pose no risk to anyone and who wish to settle here legally". It also seems concerned to reassure the typical and often racist concerns of the general public such as whether asylum seekers will take local jobs. Their solution is simply not to allow asylum seekers to work unless they have had their applications for 6 months, and have been unable to make a decision on their case.

It would seem that the Home Office's fear of local reaction to the Accommodation Centres is justified in the light of the initial racist response to the proposed Centre in Bicester, where local residents have set up a campaign.

Swamped!

Below is a copy of a letter sent to the National Coalition of Anti-Deportation Campaigns (NCADC) in response to the latest Blunkett blunder...

Dear NCADC,

Insensitive words like the ones used by the Home Secretary last week put many refugees' lives in danger. No wonder narrow-minded fascists are finding room and gaining popularity. The Home Secretary should have looked at the unrest in France due to anti-immigration and racists ideas of a presidential candidate. Of all the people in the UK he should not have used such words.

I came to UK in October 1995 and have been fighting to stay here since. I get frustrated when I read news that millions of taxpayers' money is used on refugees, and nobody says anything about how much working refugees like myself pay in tax and National Insurance. I was on state funds for only 9 months Nov 1995 to August 1996. I got a full-time job and started college September 1996 and have been a taxpayer since then.

I am a qualified Accounting Technician (MAAT), Studying to be a qualified Chartered Accountant (ACCA), no criminal convictions (Law abiding Citizen), taxpayer, voter, donor to charities (Centrepunt Largest UK homelessness Organisation, Oxfam and Local neighbourhood Credit Union).

"The home secretary, David Blunkett, yesterday dug himself even deeper into the row over his claim that some local schools were being 'swamped' by the children of asylum seekers when he unrepentantly accused his critics of being ridiculous and oversensitive"

The Guardian, Friday
April 26 2002

I received a total of £2,340 in state funds (Income support and Housing benefit), before finding work. My P60s total for last 6 tax years is £15,000 (Tax & NI Paid). Hope you see my point why am angry to be called 'good for nothing immigrant'.

As a refugee myself I care about others like me and my message to everyone and my fellow refugees is "Together We'll Overcome, Conquer, Prosper And Stand."
Yours Sincerely,
W W

Bicester: the proposed site of Oxfordshire's Accommodation Centre

Local Bicester residents began their campaign STOP OPEN ASYLUM PLAN (S.O.A.P.) by displaying garish pink posters with the following text in local shops:

STOP OPEN ASYLUM PLAN
(S.O.A.P.)
THIS MEANS YOU
THE GOVERNMENT IS PLANNING A
750 CAPACITY (MINIMUM) ASYLUM
SEEKER CENTRE ON MINISTRY OF
DEFENCE LAND BETWEEN
ARNCOTT AND PIDDINGTON.

WHAT WILL YOU GET?

- 1) INCREASED CRIME ON PROPERTY
AND POSSESSIONS
- 2) ALREADY UNDER RESOURCED
POLICE UNABLE TO COPE
- 3) DIVERSION OF PUBLIC FUNDS
(TO YOUR DETRIMENT)
- 4) THREAT TO YOUR WAY OF LIFE
AND CULTURE
- 5) DEVALUATION OF YOUR
PROPERTY (40%)
- 6) INCREASED INSURANCE
PREMIUMS (HOUSE AND CAR)
- 7) BEGGING AND HARASSMENT
EVERYWHERE

DON'T WALK AWAY
Sign your Petition
HERE NOW!
Bicester Action Group

One resident, deeply concerned by the local reaction commented that "it is important that this sort of racism and ignorance is opposed and I would welcome any support from people in Oxford who would be interested in helping to put the point of view of asylum seekers. I'm sure that the enormous support for the petition is based largely on ignorance and fear rather than conscious racism."

Fortunately, the situation has begun to change in Bicester, with the SOAP campaign against the Accommodation Centre publicly backtracking on the racist elements of its campaign. Following protests against the racist posters by individuals and the local churches (but a shameful silence from local politicians), the local newspapers reported a 'backlash' against the campaign's literature, and SOAP felt obliged publicly to distance themselves from the distribution of BNP leaflets to local residents. Almost all of the offending posters were removed by local shopkeepers.

A local resident, supportive of asylum seekers commented, "I think that the timing of our condemnation was very fortunate as, just 3 days after the local papers reported our disapproval, Le Pen succeeded in going through to the second round of the French elections. I think this gave enormous weight to what we were saying, about the need to be ever-vigilant against racism. I doubt whether we would have had so much sway in normal circumstances, as many people would have thought we were exaggerating the danger."

The upshot was that Tony Baldry, Bicester's Tory MP, launched his own new and separate petition simply demanding a full public enquiry into the plans. He managed to get 10000 local signatures, one third of Bicester's total population, in just a few weeks.

Now that the government has confirmed that the Bicester Centre is to go ahead, Tony Baldry has called for the town to gather to demand a Public Enquiry on Sat 18 May at 4pm. The gathering will be on Pingle Field, a playing field adjacent to the 'Bicester Village Designer Outlet Centre'. The event is to be leafleted by supporters of asylum seekers. The Anti-Nazi League will also be present, with their leaflets targeting the emerging BNP presence in Bicester.

There will be a great deal of work to do in the near future by anyone in Oxfordshire who is concerned about the welfare of asylum seekers. It is hoped that a Bicester campaign will encompass a broad alliance of groups, including local churches, experienced political activists and concerned residents. It will aim to ensure that asylum seekers are given adequate support by the government, and are welcomed, rather than vilified, by local residents.

For more details

about how you can get involved with the Bicester campaign please email BicesterRefugeeSupport@btopenworld.com

Barbed Wire Beat (14mins VHS)

A moving and dynamic journey through the years of campaigning against immigration detention at Campsfield Detention Centre in Oxfordshire. Showing the beat of resistance from the detainees and supporters in rooftop protests, hunger strikes, the Campsfield 9 court case and the international mobilisations against Barbed Wire Europe.

Set to music from the Banner Theatre's "Fortress Europe" CD, Barbed Wire Beat is important viewing for all those opposing the human rights abuse of immigration detention. £5 to individuals & immigration rights campaigns. £10 to organisations.



Yarl's Wood Cover Up?

Yarl's Wood was to be Europe's biggest refugee prison. It was built inside a military complex, with high security, notably a series of metal barriers in all the corridors so that moving around was extremely difficult.

Detainees who have been in both Campsfield and Yarl's Wood say that Yarl's Wood was much worse, and far more restrictive, in spite of its deceptive external appearance which led the tabloids to call it a five-star hotel. It held women, men, children and babies. Like Campsfield, it was run by Group 4.

Tensions built up from the start. On February 14 these erupted when detainees saw, in an episode of a type familiar to Campsfield campaigners, an elderly woman being dragged along the ground by Group 4 guards. The occupied half of the building was destroyed in a fire, which apparently originated in a reception area to which detainees did not have access. All the detainees have now been moved out because insurance cover has run out and can't be renewed. Several people escaped and were recaptured. Ministers claim that twenty are still 'at large'. The tragedy is that some may have died rather than escaped.

A former Group 4 guard has told the local newspaper that, when the fire started, ten Asians went to the prayer room. They have not been seen since. The police do not expect to eliminate the possibility of finding human remains at the site until the middle of May.

If no-one was killed in the fire, it is no thanks to Group 4. The fire service was kept waiting outside for an hour. Blunkett's claim that the detainees obstructed their access are contradicted by the police and by the fire service, who say it was, on the contrary, Group 4 who stopped them going in when the fire could have been controlled. Worse, over a dozen detainees, several of them women, have told visitors and friends that Group 4 locked doors and steel barriers and then abandoned them (in behaviour, again, familiar to Campsfield campaigners).



The women say that it was only because other detainees helped them by breaking windows and finding ways round the locked barriers that they managed to escape from the burning building. Their accounts are corroborated by detainees who describe how they went to and fro helping people to get out.

Once outside, detainees could see others trapped inside and pleaded with police (or possibly guards in riot gear) to help them. The officers simply stood there. As one woman put it:

"When I asked [detainees] what officers were doing about this situation, they said there is no officers, cos they all ran away. I just couldn't believe it ... I saw that all doors and the gates (we had them along the whole corridors) were locked. No officers, no police, no fire brigade or anybody else. Only scared people everywhere. ... Then some male detainees were trying to get people out of the building. If it hadn't been for them, we would all be burned in that fire."

Since the fire, detainees who have tried to tell the world what happened have been put in solitary confinement, at Yarl's Wood and at other prisons. Many have been dispersed to prisons around the country, where communication is difficult or impossible. Some have been deported, and others are threatened with deportation.

MPs have put down an Early Day Motion (EDM 1048) to try to stop this, and calling, not for a full public inquiry as campaigners had urged, but for a 'public element' in investigations. The Campaign To Stop Arbitrary Detentions at Yarl's Wood is asking people to write to their MPs to get them to sign the motion. The police, the Immigration Service and Group 4 are conducting their own, secret, inquiries, whose results may or not be published on a date they will not disclose.

In April campaigners' fears that, as happened at Campsfield, detainees would be arbitrarily picked out and charged were unfortunately realised. Ten detainees were charged with violent disorder. The Yarl's Wood campaign, with support from the Campaign to Close Campsfield, is discussing with lawyers how to prevent unjust convictions. They are organising vigils and demos, and visiting and writing to many detainees - hampered by the unwillingness or inability of the authorities to say where they are.

For information on demonstrations, actions and offers of help, contact
Campaign to Stop Arbitrary Detentions at Yarl's Wood

Tel: 07786 517379. or **Post** to PO Box 304, Oakley, Bedford, MK43 7WB.

Email: stoparbitrarydetentionsatyarlswood@hotmail.com

www.stoparbitrarydetentionsatyarlswood.co.uk

Open Borders: The case against Immigration Controls by Teresa Hayter (Pluto Press, 2000)

Open Borders by Teresa Hayter looks at the growth of immigration controls since 1900, and makes a compelling case for the abolition of all border controls.

Hayter begins the book with a scholarly account of the history of migration patterns and the response to them in Europe, and particularly Britain. She studies the history of Britain's attempts to legislate against immigration, and draws on her own experience as a Close Campsfield activist to examine the present response to asylum seekers, including detention. Open Borders provides an insight into the international movement to promote the human rights of immigrants, focusing on Britain and the French sans-papiers movement. She ends the book with an argument why we should abolish all border controls on humanitarian and economic grounds.

Open Borders reveals the history of British border controls to be shocking for its overt racism. But what is most interesting to me about the book was its argument for the abolition of all border controls.

Hayter argues that the suffering caused by the immigration controls is indefensible. Border controls necessitate the routine flouting of the Human Rights Act, specifically those articles dealing with the right to be free from inhumane or degrading treatment and arbitrary arrest or imprisonment, the right to a trial, and the right to work. As most people do not want to leave their country of birth and are forced to, by economic hardship or oppression, it is terrible that they face this inhuman treatment when they arrive at our borders.

One of the reasons that are given for the imposition of immigration controls is numbers. It is claimed that if we do not have controls then we will be 'swamped' by a 'flood' of refugees. Hayter dismisses this claim. She asserts that border controls have very little impact on the numbers of immigrants and that open borders would facilitate return immigration and encourage emigration.

I am not totally convinced by this argument, but as numbers of asylum seekers is so small I do not think that an increase would be a problem.

It is also claimed (most famously by Margaret Thatcher) that by reassuring people about the numbers we could eliminate racism. By this logic strict border controls should decrease racism. Instead they legitimize it and increase it. It is no accident that black asylum seekers are treated very differently from white immigrants from Europe or America. Can you see a white American moving to this country being placed in detention? The controls are racist and are based on an assumption of the desirability of a homogenous society. The media also target asylum seekers, with the result that racist attacks upon asylum seekers are becoming more and more common.

Teresa Hayter's Open Borders offers a clear and readable introduction to the politics of border controls that balances well researched factual insight with an activist's passion. I would recommend reading it!

Reviewed by Laura Lawson

Terrorism Legislation Threatens Asylum Rights

The UK and EU's recent expansion of terrorism legislation is a threat to democracy and asylum rights. Its powers of search, arrest and detention are wide ranging and its definition broad enough to encompass virtually any form of political dissent and protest. Even wearing a t-shirt expressing support for a banned organisation, such as the Kurdish Workers Party (PKK) who have operated a cease fire for over two years, is a potential terrorist offence. The terrorism laws are formalising the criminalisation of communities brought about by the government's racist immigration policy.

The Terrorism Act 2000 defines terrorism as the use or threat of action involving violence against property or people or serious risk to health and safety, designed to influence any government or intimidate members of the public anywhere in the world for political, religious or ideological causes. It allows the home secretary to ban any organisation seen as a threat to the national security of the country, which is commonly agreed to include threats to 'friendly countries' including Israel, Turkey and Sri Lanka, who have placed the government under great pressure to clamp down on groups such as the Kurds, Tamils and Palestinians, fighting against severe oppression and for their right to self determination.

Under the act, even professing to be a member of a proscribed organisation can be taken to be an offence, or organising a meeting of more than three people at which a member of a proscribed organisation is given a platform. Membership of groups such as the Mujahedin in Iran or PKK has been grounds for granting asylum in the UK.

Asylum seekers are now faced with a double edged sword, they are liable to criminal proceedings if they admit to membership of a banned group, and likely to be deported if they do not.

Minority and refugee communities supporting liberation struggles of oppressed peoples in countries that the UK government's trade policies designate as friendly are effectively criminalised by the act.

The Institute of Race Relations recent report, 'Racism: the hidden cost of September 11', identified asylum seekers and Europe's Muslim communities as those most likely to suffer from the EU's new terrorism laws and their denial of civil liberties. The report highlighted the effect the "war on terrorism" is having in boosting the far right, and contributing to the intense atmosphere of intimidation of Muslim communities in the wake of September 11.

Find out more about the impacts of Terrorism legislation on asylum rights at:

Campaign Against Criminalising Communities www.cacc.org.uk

Statewatch www.statewatch.org

Oppose the Terrorism Act www.blagged.freemove.co.uk/ta2000/fhome.htm

Campaign to Close Campsfield

Campsfield House is an Immigration Detention Centre at Kidlington, six miles from Oxford. It is a prison run for private profit by Group 4, supervised by Home Office immigration officials. It used to be a youth detention centre, but it re-opened as an Immigration Detention Centre in November 1993. The local parish council was opposed to it, but their wishes were overruled by the Home Office.

We'd rather lock nurses in a burning prison than risk letting any refugees escape

Group 4 Securitas run **Yarl's Wood** detention centre for asylum seekers in Bedfordshire, England.

Group Fear - On Thursday, February 14th 2002 a fire broke out and a number of inmates escaped. Witnesses suggest that trouble started when an elderly woman seeking medical attention was seen handcuffed and being dragged across a floor by Group 4 staff. **Staff were seen locking corridors and then leaving.** The detainees had to break windows to rescue each other. Once outside they were pushed and kicked back inside by Group 4 riot officers.

Grope 4 - A senior firefighter said *'It was absolutely atrocious. There must be emergency plans regarding fire, riot, and unrest. Why did it take so long for the plans to be implemented?'* **Detainees found and rescued several nurses locked in the medical unit.** Some Group 4 staff, abandoned by their colleagues, have written to detainees to thank them for rescuing them.

Group Fraud - The Bedfordshire Police Chief Constable said in a letter to the Home Office that the police search for bodies may be hampered by Group 4's *'haphazard record keeping'*. The Home Office has deported at least one detainee who had been held in segregation after the fire, and has tried to deport another key witness currently being held in prison.

Greed 4 - Group 4 is a Private Finance Initiative (PFI) partner with the New Labour Government, currently making a profit from running prisons and detention centres, and branching out into hospitals and even schools.

For more information:

www.barbedwirebritain.org.uk
www.corporatewatch.org.uk



There are up to 200 detainees in Campsfield House at any one time. Most are political refugees fleeing danger, torture and even death from countries such as Nigeria, Algeria, Afghanistan, Turkey, Iraq, the former Yugoslavia and Zimbabwe. They are held without charge, without time limit, without proper reasons given, and without proper access to legal representation. Amnesty International report that these are breaches of internationally recognised human rights.

The Close Campsfield campaign aims to:

- Close Campsfield, other detention centres, and detention wings in prisons;
- Stop immigration detentions and imprisonment;
- Stop racist deportations;
- Repeal immigration laws which reinforce racism.

The Campaign to Close Campsfield is supported by refugee organisations, trades unions, political parties, student organisations and religious groups.

How you can get involved

We hold monthly campaign planning meetings on the first Tuesday of every month from 7pm at Oxford Town Hall. Everyone is welcome.

We demonstrate outside Campsfield on the **last Saturday of every month**. These demos are from 12 noon to 2pm at the main gates, Langford Lane, Kidlington (Oxford bus, 2B/C or D, or lifts from outside Debenhams at 11:30).

You can affiliate to the Close Campsfield Campaign as an individual or an organisation. The cost of joining / affiliation for individuals is £5 (£3 unwaged) a year. The cost for groups is £10, or £20 a year (to include minutes of meetings). You can send cheques made out to: The Campaign to Close Campsfield.

You can also contact us by phone on 01865 558 145 or 01865 726 804 or 01993 703 994

If you would like more information about the Close Campsfield Campaign or how to get involved, please see our website.

www.closecampsfield.org.uk