



Shut Yarl's Wood Down

Maryam Namazie

One quarter to a half of Yarl's Wood prison located in Bedfordshire, which was opened 13 weeks ago on the site of a former UK Ministry of Defence base, was burned down by a fire that began on 14 February. With several of the 'detainees' unaccounted for, there is serious concern that some may have been wounded or even killed as a result. If so, they will become the latest victims and human tragedies of Fortress UK.

Billed as the largest immigration 'detention centre' in Europe, Yarl's Wood was an important part of the government's programme to expedite and increase deportations from the UK. Information received on the treatment of the 'detainees' reveals the extent of the government's brutality towards people who have fled persecution and repression. According to the Campaign Against Arbitrary Detention at Yarl's Wood: 'Many fire-fighters expressed their shock at the treatment of detainees by Group 4 staff [the private company running the prison for the immigration service] and police. They described people being herded like animals through the locked building. After being left to

stand in the cold, detainees were handcuffed to the seat rails on the busses that took them away from the detention centre. Sources reveal that fire-fighters had to bring in special equipment to tear down doors that were otherwise impenetrable. ...Fire fighters were prevented by Group 4 and the police from entering the locked, burning buildings to check for trapped detainees...'

Though there has been no definitive statement by the UK Home Office, many groups have commented on the cause of the fire and suggested solutions. The GMB union, which represents 170 staff at Yarl's Wood, and others blame the fire and 'riot' on insufficient training and understaffing. Others highlight poor conditions such as the fact that the Category B prison complex was built too hastily and had no sprinkler system, that Group 4 treated 'detainees' unfairly, had an appalling record and failed to deploy staff effectively. They add that Group 4, like all other private companies, ran this centre for profit, which is why they were prepared to leave it under-staffed and sprinkler free.

While some of the issues raised against Yarl's Wood

are justified and some of the recommendations legitimate, they nonetheless fail to address the root reason for the occurrence and give real solutions. Would, for example, sufficient training and staffing really solve the problem? If enough sprinklers were put in place, if detainees were not mistreated and the government ran the prison instead of Group 4, what then? Would everything be okay if detention was no longer arbitrary? What if a full independent public inquiry into the events leading up to the incident took place and an explanation was given as to why Group 4 ignored Fire Authority recommendations to install a sprinkler system and had so few staff on duty? Would the fires and riots and deaths end? Of course they wouldn't. These suggested measures are like calling for a moratorium on the death penalty in the US until the USA government can ensure that executions are not racially biased, rather than calling for an end to executions, full stop.

Nothing the UK government can do will stop these tragedies short of shutting down Yarl's Wood and all 'detention centres'. This is where the real debate and solution lies. No government can imprison people for being

homeless - it's unacceptable in this day and age. Likewise, no government should be allowed to imprison migrants who are homeless and unable and unwilling to return to their 'homes.' The people who are imprisoned in Yarl's Wood and other prisons, are not detainees, they are prisoners of conscience. Yarl's Wood is not a 'detention centre' but a prison and concentration camp. The prisoners are not violent and criminal, but persons who have fled criminal and violent regimes, many of them supported by the UK government. The Islamic regime in Iran is a good case in point. Moreover, it is the UK government's policy of detention and deportation that is violent and criminal.

Like in Australia, this 'problem' won't be resolved by rebuilding Yarl's Wood, adding more detention centres and expediting and increasing deportations as Home Secretary Blunkett's White Paper suggests. Like in Australia, the problem will only escalate until we too witness sewn lips and increased suicides.

A principled approach and solution to Yarl's Wood and all other so-called centres is to demand an end to them and deportation of migrants, full stop.

Protest against German Government Policy

Hundreds joined a rally in protest against the anti-asylum policies of the German government organised by the International Federation of Iranian Refugees - German branch in the centre of Leipzig.

The protestors remembered Mohammad Hussein Tamana, an Iranian asylum seeker, and a Vietnamese asylum seeker who both killed themselves after receiving deportation orders. They held the German government

accountable for the deaths.

Speakers, including Nasrin Ramzanali, the IFIR German Branch Director, strongly condemned the German government for its anti-asylum policy and deporting

asylum seekers back to persecution. The protestors passed a resolution calling for the re-opening of closed asylum applications, the granting of asylum to those fleeing Iran, and an end to deportations.

10th Conference of IFIR - Germany

The International Federation of Iranian Refugees – German Branch successfully concluded its 10th annual conference on 10 February, after three days of intense debates, discussions and formal business.

Guests including representatives of the International Committee Against Stoning, the International Campaign in

Defence of Women's Rights in Iran, the Federation of Kurdish Refugees, Pro Asyl, and other advocates spoke on the first day.

On the second and third day of the conference, Nasrin Ramzanali, the Director of IFIR-Germany opened the conference. A message from Maryam Namazie, IFIR Executive Director, was read followed by speeches by

Keyvan Javid, IFIR's Vice Executive Director and Farshad Hoseini, a member of the IFIR's International Secretariat, among others. The conference deliberated on the IFIR-German Branch's activity report for the past 18 months and its future plan of action. Nasrin Ramzanali was unanimously re-elected for another term of office. At the end of the conference a resolution was

adopted, which stated the following:

* Iran is not a safe country;

* Refused asylum cases must be reconsidered;

* Iranian asylum seekers and women and those fleeing Islam stricken societies must have the right to asylum; and

* Deportations to Iran must be stopped.

Women's Conferences



* NUS Women's Conference

Maryam Namazie, the IFIR Executive Director, will be a guest speaker at the National Union of Students' Women's Conference being held 4-6 March 2002 in the Winter Gardens, Blackpool.

* On the Occasion of 8 March: Islam, Secularism and Women in the Middle East Conference

Namazie will be also be speaking at a conference entitled 'Islam, Secularism and Women in the Middle East' organised by the Middle Eastern Centre for Women's Studies (MECWS) and Medusa to be held in University of London Union, Malet Street, London WC1E 7HY on 9 March during 10-5pm. For more information, contact: Nadia Mahmoud: Tel: +44789 00 65 933, Email: mecws@ukonline.co.uk.

Visit IFIR Site
for latest
international
refugee news,
urgent actions and
press releases:

www.hambastegi.org

International Refugee News

(Agence France Presse, February 15, 2002) Some 150,000 people took to the streets of Rome Friday, paralyzing the city for hours, to protest the social policies of Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi's right-wing government. Protestors gathered to voice their opposition to many of Berlusconi's social policies, including the restrictive immigration bill, a controversial new bill on 'illegal immigration' that, among other things, introduced harsh prison sentences for immigrants who return after being expelled.

(Bulgarian News Agency (via BBC), February 15, 2002) Bulgaria will offer temporary protection to foreigners entering this country in large numbers when they have been forced to leave their country of origin or place of residence because of an armed conflict, civil war, foreign aggression, violation of the human rights or large-scale violence on the territory of the respective country or part of it, which prevents them from returning there. This is envisaged in a bill on asylum and refugees which the parliament passed on first reading on Friday 15 February.

(The Sydney Morning Herald, February 15, 2002) Dozens of officials from the departments of Prime Minister and Cabinet, Defence and Immigration knew the story of asylum seekers throwing their children overboard being promoted by the Government was false. The Prime Minister, John Howard, and Minister for Immigration, Philip Ruddock, continued to tell the public through the

election campaign the incident was, on best advice, genuine while criticising the alleged actions of the asylum seekers.

(The Advertiser (Australia), February 15, 2002) Allegations children's lips had been forcibly sewn together were "inconclusive", it emerged. Australian Justice Minister Chris Ellison admitted the Human Services investigation found "there was no evidence to either confirm or deny these concerns". Immigration Minister Philip Ruddock and SA Human Services Minister declared the alleged actions "barbaric" during the state election campaign.

(The Age (Australia), February 15, 2002) New Zealand Prime Minister Helen Clark has offered to relieve pressure on Australia by resettling some Afghan and Iraqi refugees who travelled to Indonesia, hoping to sail on to Australia.

(UNHCR, 15 February 2002) As UNHCR staff in Afghanistan gear up for a possible return of Afghan refugees, this spring UNHCR workers in southern Pakistan are trying to cope with a swelling wave of Afghan refugees driven from their country by lack of aid, banditry and alleged reprisals by rival ethnic groups. The country's fragile security situation and the continuing effects of drought and a devastated economy mean UNHCR cannot yet actively promote large-scale, organised 'repatriation.' In the last six weeks more than 143,000 Afghans have opted to 'spontaneously' return from Iran and Pakistan.

(Agence France Presse, February 15, 2002)

The Irish government is considering moves to tighten constitutional and legal provisions which automatically grant nationality to babies born in the country. Asylum seekers and non-EU nationals who have babies in Ireland are able to apply to stay in the country on the basis of a 1990 Supreme Court ruling and changes made to the 1937 constitution as part of the Northern Ireland peace agreement.

(Agence France Presse, February 14, 2002) Sweden plans to place a ban on marriages of immigrant women under the age of 18 in an attempt to stem families marrying off their daughters against their will, Immigration Minister Mona Sahlin said. The country is still reeling from the "honor killing" last month of Fadime Sahindal, 26. "We find ourselves up against a new dimension where young girls live under the threat and constraint of very strict, patriarchal families," Sahlin said in a statement. The young Kurdish woman was killed by her father after bringing a highly publicized court case against him for threatening to kill her for having a relationship with a Swede instead of marrying a fellow Kurd. Her killing was the fourth "honor killing" in Sweden since 1994. Currently, immigrants are allowed to marry at 15 if the law in their country of origin permits.

(Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung, February 14, 2002) Germany's main opposition Union parties said they would not support the government's immigration legislation unless it was amended to

incorporate several of their demands. Though the government, a coalition of the Social Democratic Party (SPD) and Alliance 90/The Greens, has the votes to pass the law in the German parliament, it does not have a majority in the second legislative chamber, the Bundesrat, which represents the interests of states at the federal level. The Union parties have demanded that the proposed law put a cap on the number of foreigners and asylum seekers allowed into the country. They also want the maximum age of children allowed to join their immigrant parents to be lowered to 10, from 14 under the government's plan.

(BBC Monitoring Service - United Kingdom; Feb 13, 2002) The British Home Office arranged a meeting on 8 February 2002 attended by the representatives of the Kurdistan regional government in Britain. The British Home Office staff informed the representatives of these parties that the British government is ready to help and 'repatriate' any asylum seeker who wants to return to the Iraqi Kurdistan region. The British Home Office staff mentioned that they would not repatriate anyone involuntarily. However, it is not certain that this decision will be valid for a long time.

(UNHCR, 8 February 2002) Preparations for the organized 'repatriation' of Afghans are going forward. The Iranian government is preparing 10 'repatriation' centres where Afghans will

Next Issue:
Monday
4 March

be able to register, and it's also constructing three special exit points along its border with Afghanistan to facilitate crossings. In Pakistan's Baluchistan Province, UNHCR and the government plan next week to survey Afghan refugees living in the newly established camps to obtain information about where people want to go, and when they might be prepared to return.

(Agence France Presse, February 7, 2002) Two Iranian asylum-seekers were attacked in the eastern state of Saxony, Germany by a four youngsters using knives and bottles in what police said could have been a racist attack. The two victims, aged 33 and 37, were walking along a road at night when four young people jumped out of a car and attacked them. The 37-year-old Iranian suffered bruises and cuts while the other man was taken to hospital suffering from concussion.

(The Age (Australia), February 6, 2002) The lawyer who took the Tampa asylum seekers' case to the High Court is planning a class action against the Howard Government seeking the immediate removal of boat people from Manus Island in Papua New Guinea. Melbourne solicitor Eric Vadarlis said the action to be launched in the Federal Court would claim the government breached its duty of care and was negligent in its treatment of the asylum seekers. It would seek compensation and an order requiring their immediate removal from the

island. It would be based on claims that the government did not provide medication to the detainees in sufficient time to ward off malaria. The Age reported yesterday that 15 of the detainees had the disease, but Mr Ruddock repeated that none of the asylum seekers had malaria.

(Reuters, February 6, 2002) Australia's human rights watchdog charged the government for the first time with a breach of international human rights over its detention of child asylum seekers. Sev Ozdowski's charge came a day after U.N. High Commissioner for Human Rights, Mary Robinson, pressed for permission to send a special envoy to visit the country's controversial detention camps. Ozdowski had said until now that children should not be subject to mandatory detention and that conditions at the camps might be in violation of human rights.

(February 5, 2002, (PINA Nius Online) Australia's 'Pacific Solution' on asylum seekers is causing mayhem on Papua New Guinea's Manus Island. Asylum seekers sent by Australia have been injured in escape attempts, have potentially fatal diseases, and have staged hunger strikes and wrecked property during protests. One Iraqi man has reportedly tried to kill himself at the Australian-funded detention centre, built at the PNG Defence Force's Lombrum Naval Base. In what some lawyers see as a breach of human rights, the asylum seekers have been

denied access to independent legal advice on the instructions of the Australian Government, according to PNG officials.

(European Roma Rights Center, February 5, 2002) European Roma Rights Center (ERRC) welcomes the February 5, 2002 decision by the European Court of Human Rights, finding that Belgium violated key provisions of the European Convention on Human Rights when it collectively expelled, in October 1999, 74 Roma from Slovakia who were seeking asylum in Belgium. In connection with the case, the Court Tuesday awarded 10,000 euros in damages to a Romani family called Conka, who had filed a complaint to the Court in relation to the case. The ruling is not only the first ever by the Court in a case involving the collective expulsion of Roma, it is actually the first time the Court has ever found a violation of Article 4 of Protocol 4 to the European Convention, which bans the collective expulsion of aliens.

(Globe and Mail, February 9, 2002) The Ontario Court of Appeal has rejected a bid to remain in Canada by a man accused of being an Iranian terrorist, but has stayed Mansour Ahani's deportation for 30 days while he appeals to the nation's highest court. Mr. Ahani, who claims he will be tortured or killed if he is sent back to Iran, had asked the appeal court to allow him to stay until the United Nations Human Rights Committee considers his appeal of Canada's deportation order, a process that could take four or five years. He has been in jail in Canada since 1993.

(A u s t r a l i a n Broadcasting Corporation,

February 6, 2002) Nauru has indicated it will consider keeping Australia's unwanted asylum seekers beyond the initial cut off point of May.

(The Associated Press, February 5, 2002) The European Union's parliament called on EU governments to give more rights to long-term, non-European residents working within the 15-nation bloc. The 626-member European Parliament voted 408 to 89, with 28 abstentions, to back a nonbinding resolution advocating treatment of legally resident foreigners that is equal to that of EU citizens in such areas such as social benefits and employment, training and working conditions. The EU assembly also called for non-EU nationals to be granted better political and legal standing as well, including the ability to vote in local and European elections. In its resolution, the parliament said "a set of uniform rights which are as near as possible to those enjoyed by EU citizens."

(The Guardian, February 5, 2002) The UK government last night dropped the £2,000 fines imposed against Eurotunnel each time a clandestine asylum seeker is discovered on freight trains into Britain.

(Reuters, February 5, 2002) Malaysia will whip 'illegal immigrants' and their employers to deal with the growing problem of foreign aliens, and has also introduced a "hire Indonesians last" policy.

Editor: Maryam Namazie; **Asst. Editor:** Javad Aslani

E-mail: ifir@ukonline.co.uk

Tel: +44 7730 107 337

P.O. Box 27236, London N11, England

www.hambastegi.org

Maryam Namazie,
Executive Director

Keyvan Javid, Deputy
Executive Director