



Long-term immigration detention – a waste of money and lives?

Immigration detention in the UK is **without time limit**: the UK has derogated from the EU Returns Directive that sets a maximum time limit of 18 months.

Long-term detention is the result of intractable **barriers to removal**, combined with the reluctance of the UK Border Agency (UKBA) to release ex-offenders who have finished their sentences. Migrants and asylum-seekers from several countries cannot be deported due to the difficulties in obtaining travel documents from the relevant embassies. Legal barriers exist to removals to countries such as Somalia, Iraq and Zimbabwe. After they finish prison sentences they are warehoused in detention, with little prospect of release or deportation.

According to the latest UKBA statistics, 174 people had been detained for over a year at 30 June 2012, down from a peak of 255 at 31 December 2010.

Long-term detention is a highly **inefficient use of detention spaces**, as the longer a person is detained, the less likely is their deportation. According to UKBA statistics, of detainees leaving detention after more than a year in 2011, 62% were released and 38% removed. These proportions are exactly reversed, for detainees released after less than a year. Detention Action's September 2010 report "No Return No Release No Reason" monitored the cases of 167 long-term detainees, of whom only a third (34%) were deported. Between 2007 and 2010, overall numbers of enforced removals and notified voluntary returns declined by 6%. Yet in the same period the number of migrants detained at any one time increased by 38%.

Mohammed, detained 2 years: "There's nothing to do, every night. I start hearing voices, hearing voices, tell you do crazy things to myself. I'm using medication right now. I'm depressing... I've never had medication in my life before now, never. Not in my country, never. All this medication, sleeping tablets. I'm coming in here and starting using everything."

Long-term detention wastes tax-payers' money. The average cost per person per night in detention is around £130, or over £47,000 per year. The Home Office paid out £3 million in 2008-09 and £12 million in 2009-10 in compensation and legal costs arising from unlawful detention actions.

There is an alternative. Other EU states achieve far higher rates of removal of refused asylum-seekers without using indefinite detention. 82% of returned asylum seekers in Sweden left voluntarily in 2008; Sweden secures the return of around 80% of refused asylum seekers, far higher than the British rate.

Detention Action provides emotional and practical support to people in immigration detention, primarily in Harmondsworth and Colnbrook Immigration Removal Centres near Heathrow Airport, and campaigns for improvements to the detention system.