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Press Release

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Cruel detention of torture victims at Harmondsworth shows need for end to indefinite detention, says Jesuit Refugee Service

JRS UK has called on the government to end indefinite detention, in response to the latest damning inspection of Harmondsworth Immigration Removal Centre, which highlighted the continuing detention of highly vulnerable men, sometimes for long periods of time. JRS UK described the report's findings as "deeply troubling, but sadly not surprising".

Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Prisons published their report today of an unannounced inspection into Harmondsworth IRC. The report highlights "considerable failings" in safety and respect for detainees. Inspectors raised concerns that vulnerable detainees are not being adequately safeguarded, with mental health needs remaining largely unmet in the prison-like conditions. Worryingly, in nearly all cases examined, detention was maintained despite clear evidence that detainees had been tortured. Nearly one third of the population was identified as being at risk under the Home Office policy, yet was not released. Potential trafficking victims were not referred to the appropriate channels and unable to receive necessary assistance, as many staff members were unfamiliar with the referral mechanism.

The report recommended the introduction of a time limit on the length of detention. The continuing absence of a time limit on immigration detention led to several individuals being detained for excessively long periods of time: 23 men had been detained for over a year and one man had been held for over 4.5 years. The UK is the only country in Europe which detains migrants indefinitely without a time limit and practices routine detention of migrants for administrative reasons.

JRS UK is one of a number of organisations providing regular pastoral support to men held in Harmondsworth IRC. Such services provided by voluntary groups were one of the few areas highlighted for praise in the inspection report. The availability of advice surgeries and social visits carried out by these groups, including JRS UK, was deeply appreciated by detainees and contributed to easing some of the negative effects of detention.

Commenting on the outcome of this inspection, JRS UK Director Sarah Teather said:

“This report once again reveals the cruelty of the detention system, a system which incarcerates many already acknowledged to be vulnerable. The widespread detention of torture victims is unacceptable, and it is only the tip of the iceberg. People displaying mental health needs, victims of human trafficking and individuals suffering from severe physical conditions and disabilities are all routinely detained despite evidence that this detention is damaging to their health. What makes this situation even more outrageous is the fact that detention can last for an indefinite period of time. 23 men in Harmondsworth have been detained for over a year: that is a year of someone’s life lived in limbo, in prison-like conditions without having committed any crime.

“Our experience of supporting detainees corroborates the report's findings that detention has a crippling effect on individual well-being. Our volunteers routinely come across extremely vulnerable individuals whose conditions are made significantly worse by the uncertainty and despair that surround them. In light of this report, we can only renew our commitment to stand in solidarity with those held in immigration detention and to continue to accompany them through this dark time in their lives.

“Once more, we call on the government to recognise the devastating effects of detention. It is life-destroying. It is time to end indefinite detention.”

Harmondsworth IRC, which has an operational capacity of 676 male detainees, is built to Category B prison standards and is currently Europe’s largest detention facility. It is one of the eight long-term residential immigration detention centres in the UK. In 2017, a total of 27,331 people entered detention. 53% of people leaving detention were released back into the community.

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Notes to Editor

1. The Jesuit Refugee Service (JRS) is an international Catholic organisation, at work in 51 countries around the world with a shared mission to accompany, serve and advocate on behalf of refugees and other forcibly displaced persons. In the UK, our work currently focuses on those who find themselves destitute as a consequence of government policies and those detained for the administration of immigration procedures.
2. JRS UK has an outreach service to the Heathrow Immigration Removal Centres where it undertakes pastoral and befriending work with all those held in detention, including asylum seekers, and others struggling to regularise their immigration status. It has previously expressed concern that many of those seeking its help appear to be victims of trafficking, and reacted with alarm at the rising numbers of EU citizens in detention also seeking its help. JRS UK is joining others in arguing for an end to indefinite detention.
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