

# Abuse is 'systematic' at asylum detention centres

Jamie Doward, social affairs editor  
Sunday May 23, 2004

## [The Observer](#)

<http://observer.guardian.co.uk/politics/story/0,6903,1222788,00.html>

A scandal involving systematic physical, mental and verbal abuse of asylum seekers in British detention centres is being investigated amid calls for the government to create a new watchdog to monitor the welfare of detainees.

An Observer investigation can reveal that a series of incidents has led to a criminal investigation and civil claims for damages over a series of alleged assaults, reportedly involving beatings and, in one case, a death.

In one case, at Harmondsworth detention centre near Heathrow, proceedings filed in the High Court allege that a Turkish detainee in his twenties was taken to a segregation unit, where he was subjected to a series of blows by guards that left him with cuts to the face.

In another case, a middle-aged Kenyan woman was alleged to have received facial injuries after apparently resisting being put on a flight by her three escorts from a detention centre. Newspaper reports say passengers on the Kenyan Airways plane told immigration officials they were shocked to see Bernice Wairimu Mamau's swollen face and cheeks.

Last week, scores of detainees at Harmondsworth went on a five-day hunger strike in an attempt to draw attention to the alleged abuses. More hunger strikes are planned.

Six employees of UK Detention Services, the private firm that runs Harmondsworth, have been interviewed by the police. A spokeswoman for the Immigration Service confirmed it was investigating the assault claims.

An investigation has also been launched into the death in April of an asylum seeker at Haslar detention centre in Gosport, which was the scene of riots and break-outs in 2003.

A post-mortem examination recorded that the cause of death was inconclusive.

'Abuse is widespread,' said Emma Ginn, who runs a support group for asylum seekers. 'We're getting calls all the time. Some abuse takes place in the detention centres, but most takes place out of sight of CCTV cameras.'

A spokesman for UK Detention Services, which runs the Heathrow centre, confirmed the company was aware of the allegations, but declined to comment further.

Scores of civil lawsuits are being launched by asylum seekers who claim they have been assaulted by detention centre staff and escort teams.

Campaign groups yesterday revealed they have been inundated with complaints of abuse from asylum seekers since the start of the year.

Birnberg Pierce, a London-based solicitors firm that represents asylum seekers, says it is now receiving a new allegation of abuse every day.

Labour MP Neil Gerrard, chairman of the all-party group on refugees, said: 'What has struck me is the number of similar stories that have kept coming up. They can't all be false. Things are happening that should not be happening.'

Last night, a Home Office spokesman said: 'Any claims of assault will be taken very seriously.'

In addition to claiming they are being mistreated by staff, detainees complain about the food and the length of time they have been held in the centre. Some detainees have been held for up to three years

before being deported or released.

'The law states quite clearly that people should be detained only as a last resort. They should have their liberty curtailed only if they are about to be removed or if they have shown a history of not complying with the conditions of their temporary admission to the country. But people have been held for months on end,' said Harriet Wistrich, a solicitor with Birnberg Pierce.

In addition to allegations of physical assault, there are also claims that asylum seekers have suffered other forms of abuse.

Support groups said they were also concerned about the way detainees were being transported around the country, with many spending hours locked up in vans with no food or water.

Last night, campaigners called for the creation of an independent watchdog to monitor Britain's nine asylum centres, which currently house around 1,500 detainees.

Currently, the monitoring of conditions in asylum centres is the responsibility of organisations called Independent Monitoring Boards, whose members are appointed by the Home Office and who are under no obligation to publish their findings.