

26 October 2012

**JUSTICE FOR WOMEN IN YARL'S WOOD – NO REPRISALS FOR DEMANDING
RIGHTS**

Every woman who is detained against her will in Yarl's Wood Immigration Removal Centre faces a life of oppression and persecution if she is deported to the country she left. She will face this oppression and persecution **simply because she is a woman**, whatever form the oppression takes and whatever her personal history. That's why no woman should be in Yarl's Wood. That is what united women in Yarl's Wood to protest against the brutality of the guards who tried to deport **Christine Nankya** on 15 October.

The Yarl's Wood Centre exists to deny women the right to build a life free from oppression, brutality and persecution. The UKBA and Serco deny women that fundamental human right on a daily basis by the way they run the Centre. Every woman in Yarl's Wood has her own personal experience of this racist, sexist system. **Every woman's experience is a further reason to shut down Yarl's Wood.**

Over the last few months a growing number of women detainees have been organising in Yarl's Wood Immigration Removal Centre to support each other, demand their fundamental rights and fight for their freedom in collaboration with outside supporters. They made contact with the **Movement for Justice (MFJ)** and established an MFJ group in the Centre.

This started with a group of lesbians who contacted with the MFJ thanks to the efforts of one of our members, Linda Nabuuke, a lesbian asylum seeker from Uganda, who was detained on 'Fast Track' following a screening interview in April. She was a determined fighter for her own freedom, and with demonstrations at the Home Office and Internet publicity she was released in July (she has a fresh claim and Judicial Review pending). She put other women in Yarl's Wood in contact with the MFJ, some of whom have since been released and a number are active campaigners for their friends who remain in detention.

Towards the end of July two lesbian asylum seekers in the Centre contacted us - Aderonke Apata from Nigeria and Alice Nji from Cameroon, who were soon joined by a third, Freda Nsumbe from Uganda. The immediate issue was the way in which the UKBA

and Serco were exposing them to homophobic abuse from a section of the detainees in the Centre. Subsequently other lesbian inmates came forward and were soon joined by other women so that by late September the group numbered 30+, mainly African and including victims of human trafficking and forced marriage, women escaping FGM etc. More recently they have been joined by a number of women from Arab countries. They were meeting and talking about their situation regularly and MFJ members in London have met with many of them on social visits.

Over the past month or so they have drawn up a set of demands that include both the general –freedom from detention, and an end to Fast Track and deportations – and the more ‘immediate’, such as uncensored Internet access to be able to prepare their cases, not having guards present when they have medical consultations or examinations, no more male guards barging unannounced and uninvited into their rooms. The MFJ held a demonstration in their support and handed in petitions at the Home Office in Marsham Street, Westminster, last month and called another at the UKBA HQ in Croydon on 17 October; we held an emergency demonstration at the Home Office on 23 October following the most recent repression and will be there again on 31 October at 2.00pm.

The situation in Yarl’s Wood escalated on 15 October as a result of the brutal mistreatment of one of the women who has been part of the group since early in September. Her name is Christine Nankya. She is 28 years old and from Uganda. She has been in Britain for 8 or 9 years. She was a victim of family sexual abuse. As a teenager she was serially abused and raped by her own father and gave birth to her father's son when she was 19. Given the family situation and the position of women in the culture, her only escape from this horrific situation was to leave the country. She came to Britain but was homeless for a long period of time. As a result she is severely depressed and in a fragile psychological state. She was taken into detention in April this year, which has only aggravated her mental health problems. Consequently she was put on suicide watch. She has had a series of refusals and had taken an overdose of took of pills in a failed suicide attempt before a planned deportation flight to Uganda.

On Monday morning, 15 October, Christine was taken from her room in a further attempt to put her on a deportation flight. She was screaming and shouting in terror and struggling to resist removal. By that time she was naked - no-one knows how that came about but all the people everyone who witnessed the event are agreed on that point. The guards had merely thrown a blanket over her.

The noise attracted a lot of attention and staff rushed to put the Centre on immediate lock-down' by locking the detainees in whatever room they happened to be in. Aderonke and some other women who have been actively involved in the Movement for Justice group and in drawing up the list of demands were locked in the IT room but could see Christine being dragged past the door by 5 or 6 guards. One of these witnesses was Sarah Najjuma, a Ugandan lesbian who has been in the Movement for Justice since January or February this year and who was detained in August.

The news spread fast and there was a lot of anger. Christine's brutal mistreatment stood for the whole racist regime that oppresses all the women in Yarl's Wood; her fear of the ordeal the UKBA were sending her back to stood for the fear of every woman in the Centre. The women were all ordered back to their units and were on lock-down for a time, but once that ended they organised a mass meeting at 1.30pm in one of the dining halls. They yelled at the managers and demanded that they leave the room. Sarah and other women who had most closely witnessed Christine's treatment gave reports. The demands that had previously been drawn up were read out and amended with an additional section agreed on Christine. There was a unanimous vote to adopt the demands and to demand Christine's return. After the meeting these demands were given to the managers, who said they would get back to the women on Wednesday.

There were 120 or 130 women at the meeting from Africa, the Middle East, south Asia and the Caribbean (there are getting on for 400 detainees in Yarl's Wood, but that includes the induction unit - Crane House - and Hummingbird House which is the family unit and has men in it). A woman called Shazia translated the proceedings into Hindi and Urdu for other Indian and Pakistani detainees.

Christine believes she was injected with a tranquilliser by the time she got to Kingfisher House, the isolation unit within the Centre; Freda Nsumbe (who was released from Yarl's Wood in September) was able to speak to her by mobile phone about 6.00pm and reported that she sounded very dazed. Some MFJ members went to Heathrow terminal 3 to speak to passengers checking in for the Ethiopian Airways 9.00pm flight on which Christine was booked for removal. She resisted when she got to the airport with the result that she could not be deported. Christine has told other detainees that the guards took her to two other detention centres before going to Yarl's Wood, but those centres refused to accept her. The Yarl's Wood management didn't want to the women to feel that they had achieved a victory.

The following day Alice Nji from Cameroon was deported on a scheduled Virgin flight via Ghana. This flight had been booked before the Monday events and Alice had previously got off 6 deportation flights by resisting once she was on board and getting the support of passengers and crew. This time however they had 6 guards and Alice was completely over-powered and unable to attract the attention of passengers. She was able to phone Aderonke and give this report during her stop-over in Accra. It has not been possible to contact Alice in Cameroon where she is in great danger as a lesbian.

The next day (Wednesday 17 October) the MFJ demonstrated against detention and in support of the Yarl's Wood women's demands at Lunar House in Croydon. At the same time the women gathered in the dining hall again to hold a meeting in solidarity and to get the UKBA/management response to their demands. There were nearly a hundred women there; others were prevented from getting in because the guards locked the doors. The MFJ demonstrators communicated by speaker phone with the women in the meeting, some of whom were wearing T-shirts they had decorated with their demands. They joined in the chants on the demonstration. The meeting was entirely peaceful, as was the previous one.

Towards the end of the meeting the manager came and asked Aderonke to step outside to talk to him; she returned to report that there was no response from the UKBA. The women were quite rightly outraged at being treated with such arrogant contempt and some of said they should all go down to the UKBA office to protest and demand answers to their demands. The whole meeting followed into the corridor leading to the UKBA office. By then there were nearly 200 women in the corridor, but they were prevented from getting to the office. They were trapped in the corridor by electric doors, denied access to their rooms and unable to go back to the hall or any other part of the centre.

The guards said that all the women had to be searched. The women complained but agreed. However after the first few were searched they were not let back to their rooms. The guards said no-one could go back without a decision from senior management, so the women refused to submit to any more searches. They were held there from about 3.00pm until after 8.00pm. Aderonke described what happened in a report she emailed the next day.

“People that were demonstrating peacefully were locked away and trapped along a corridor without ventilation. We had over 200 women packed in there. Including people with heart conditions, elderly ones over 60 years left suffocating and fainting whilst the

managers of Serco and staff watched them being distressed. We were threatened, intimidated, oppressed for demonstrating peacefully for our freedom...

"I was amazed by the expression of unity amongst the women yesterday i.e. people from different and diverse religious and cultural background and nationality pulled together to bring the foundation of the detention centre shaking!

"To crown it all, they had to subject us to humiliation by asking that we were searched before being allowed back into our units, despite the fact that we did not leave the corridor where we were trapped, no contacts with anyone from the outside world etc.

"We had four casualties at the demonstration caused from lack of ventilation. Two women collapsed as they had underlying heart conditions, a woman over 60 years old became very, very dehydrated and nearly fainted, whilst another one had nose bleeding".

In the end the women agreed to accept the searches and the guards let each woman straight back to their rooms as soon as she had been searched.

On Thursday the whole centre was on lock-down for nearly the whole day, and the separate units were only let out for lunch etc on a rota basis for a couple of hours each. Aderonke described the situation:

"There has been more intimidation and oppression directed towards us. No free movement. We were all locked in today till 1.30pm, i.e. no access to the Internet where people could get information to support their cases, especially those on the Fast Track system who have only two days to make appeals/application etc.

"If anyone had to print materials for Judicial Reviews to stop their [flight] tickets, there was no such access until 1.30pm today".

That morning (18 October) Aderonke gave an interview over her phone to a BBC reporter; the interview was broadcast on BBC 3 Counties Radio. About 3.00 or 3.30pm guards came to her unit, Avocet House, and spoke to her, Sarah and Alaba Bello, a Nigerian woman. They were told they had to go to a meeting with managers to discuss the week's events and their demands. Aderonke argued that the women should choose who went and there should be more representatives, but the guards gave them no choice. At the same time three other women were taken from Dove House on the same pretext: Mya Fore from Zimbabwe, Eunice Williams from Jamaica and Sophie Barnet from Jamaica. On Friday morning Shazia, who had translated the proceedings of the meetings, was taken from her unit and at some point two other Jamaican women, Clarine and Shernette, were taken. All

these women were held in isolation in Kingfisher House and their mobile phones were switched off. Most were told they would be taken to prison and Aderonke was told she would be charged with inciting a riot.

The Centre remained on lock-down nearly all day on Friday until the evening, and then again on Saturday. For several long periods of time on Friday the women in Avocet House were confined to their own rooms without any explanation. When women spoke to guards or went to their unit office to ask about Aderonke and the others they were bluntly refused any answer. On Thursday and Friday an unusually large number of women were given notice of deportation flights; some of these flight directions may have been given at some point but were clearly brought forward as reprisals and to create a climate of fear and insecurity.

However an unusually large number of women were released on Friday. Apparently they included women who had been held in Yarl's Wood for a long time despite having very serious health problems (e.g. a woman with severe kidney failure. It seems likely that the UKBA feared that if any of these women should die in detention it could trigger a fresh explosion of anger.

Women reported an increased level of rudeness and arrogance from the guards over these days; some have said that as soon as two of them started talking to each other on the corridors the guards stopped the conversation. Nasra, an Indian Muslim woman, reported that Muslim women met with rudeness and refusals when they have asked to go to the prayer room. A British Asian female guard called Kiran told south Asian women that they are 'terrorists' and that their involvement in the meetings will count against their asylum claims.

Nasra reported a particularly gratuitous use of violence. A Chinese woman in Dove House, who does speak some English, asked her to help explain what the guards were saying to another Chinese detainee who doesn't speak or understand English. On Thursday or Friday guards had insisted on searching this woman's room. Three or Four guards entered her room and behaved in a particularly aggressive way, not merely searching but throwing her belongings round the room. The woman was very upset and started to throw things at the guards, who then beat her badly and banged her head on the floor. They then took her to Kingfisher House, the isolation unit within the Yarl's Wood Centre, and kept her there for 24 hours. When Nasra saw her she had been brought back and showed signs of injuries. The guards were saying she was 'crazy' and they had to take her to Kingfisher because she 'tried to kill herself'.

Throughout Thursday evening and Friday people phoned Yarl's Wood asking to speak to Aderonke and Sarah, including Aderonke's family and friends in Manchester's Nigerian community. Callers were told that Sarah could not be reached and, without any explanation, that Aderonke "Is not allowed to receive calls".

Aderonke's sister, Bisi, was eventually allowed to speak to her Friday evening. She told Bisi that when the women were taken to a room on Thursday afternoon there was no meeting; that had just been a lie. She said that they were handcuffed and she was beaten. On Saturday morning Bisi tried again to speak to Aderonke but was told that "She doesn't want to speak to anyone". When Bisi finally managed to speak her sister on Sunday Aderonke said this was yet another lie.

Aderonke was allowed a social visit on Monday. She described how she was held down violently, her head forced down and her arms twisted. Her foot and ankle was still swollen. She said she heard Sarah screaming and shouting "You are torturing me". Sarah is now in Holloway prison. She has complained to the Governor of Holloway about her treatment in Yarl's Wood. She had a prison visit by an MFJ member on Thursday (25 October) and reported that guards came to her room in Kingfisher and demanded to remove her coat; she refused because it was cold and she was forced to the floor and held down violently by six guards. **Sarah intends to write a formal complaint to the UKBA, as do many of the women still in Yarl's Wood.**

The current situation of the women taken to Kingfisher House is as follows:

Aderonke Apata has been in Kingfisher all week and is now being moved to Styal Prison in Manchester.

Sarah Najjuma is in Holloway Prison, London

Mya Fore is believed to be in Peterborough Prison

Abala Bello is in Holloway Prison

Eunice Williams is believed to be in jail in Nottingham

Sophine Barnett was released from Kingfisher on Monday

Shazia Aslam has been released from Kingfisher

Clarine & Shernette have both been released from Kingfisher

Sophine, Shazia, Clarine and Shernette have not been returned to their former units but are now in the supposedly short-stay induction unit, Crane House. **Christine Nankya** has

also been moved to Crane House. The purpose is clearly to minimize their contact with the other longer-term detainees.

The Movement for Justice believes there is now an urgent need for a full, open and independent **Public Inquiry** into the national disgrace that is Yarl's Wood Immigration removal Centre. Current and former detainees must be free to give evidence and any attempt to deport them would constitute deliberate 'destruction of evidence' by the UKBA. Witnesses must have a public guarantee that they will not be victimised or suffer reprisals for the evidence they give.