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Proposed Immigration Detention Centre in Larne, Co. Antrim

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Immigration Enforcement in the UK

The UK Border Agency (UKBA) has the right to detain anyone they suspect of committing an immigration offence, as well as people within the asylum system. Locally, this may include people who have strayed across the border, or asylum applicants who live in the community, but are thought to have broken the Home Office rules, e.g. by spending time away from home or by getting paid work, which is usually not permitted. Others are detained where it is felt that their application has little hope of success, or the application process seems to be exhausted. There is no limit on the time spent in immigration detention in Removal Centres.

Background to the Immigration Detention of People picked up in N Ireland

At one time detainees were held in the NI prison system. A campaign was mounted about people who had not been convicted of any crime being stigmatised in this way. A number of bodies (including the Churches) made representations to Government. In 2005, male detainees were no longer housed in prison but moved to a dedicated wing in a small prison 'work out unit' on Belfast's Crumlin Road and all women prisoners and female immigration detainees were moved from Maghaberry Prison to Hydebank Wood Young Offenders' Centre. The Refugee Action Group (RAG), an umbrella group including EMBRACE, was able to provide support for detainees through a visitor group. The Government then ended immigration detention in NI completely in 2005 (although sometimes people suspected of immigration offences may still be held in prison locally). From that date, people apprehended in NI have been sent to Removal Centres in Scotland and England. This has created further concerns:

- Anxiety that people may not receive timely legal advice and are therefore at greater risk of deportation to countries where human rights are abused.
- There is less scrutiny and the local spotlight of social concern.
- If detainees are removed from NI against their will, they lose contact with family, friends and support networks, including the solicitors who are familiar with their cases.

Operation Gull

A cross-border immigration enforcement operation has been in existence for some years. Operation Gull enables the UK Border Agency, the PSNI and the Gardaí to work together to apprehend and process people suspected of immigration offences. Until recently, there was no permanent UKBA office in NI so officials have tended to come over from GB and many operations take place over weekends. This has exacerbated the difficulties for people trying to contact their solicitors. Around 900 people were picked up in NI in the year up to March 2009, and detained on suspicion of breaches of immigration legislation. Of these, around 600 were eventually removed from the UK.

Proposed Immigration Detention Centre at Larne

Because quite a number of people may be picked up at any one time under Operation Gull, a difficulty arises in removing them to GB immediately. They are usually taken out by ferry and it seems that the operators will only allow 4 immigration detainees to be on each boat. This can mean a delay for some people and presently they are held in the custody suites of Police Stations during this time. The Refugee Action Group has tried to ensure that the custody sergeants have information about how to contact legal advisors but the situation is far from ideal. This is why UKBA plan to adapt part of Larne police station so that up to 22 adults can be held for no more than 7 days, before transfer to a Removal Centre in GB. It could be opened by late summer 2011.

Local Opposition

Local people whose houses are close to the station have been concerned that extra fencing and security lights are a refortification of the police station and will impact on their lives and on house prices. The British National Party has worked on these fears and made alarmist and tasteless statements about Larne being 'earmarked as a dumping ground for illegal immigrants and bogus asylum seekers'. This in turn led to other local politicians speaking in favour of the centre – not always understanding the situation fully. The Refugee Action Group then spoke out against the use of immigration detention for people, such as those in the asylum system, who have not even been accused of a crime.

Criticisms of Immigration Detention

- People who are not criminals can be held indefinitely in prison-like conditions.
- Recent reports have indicated the psychological and physical damage, especially to children, and the new Government is currently seeking alternatives to the detention of children.
- Many people who are detained are not removed subsequently.
- The system is expensive and there is little evidence that failed asylum applicants will abscond if they feel the system has treated them fairly.

Some reports for further reading

BBC News Item www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-northern-ireland-11646930

BNP leaflets www.belfasttelegraph.co.uk/news/local-national/northern-ireland/bnp-takes-hate-message-to-larne-with-fake-picture-14966990.html

Refugee Action Group report on NI immigration detention and possible alternatives
www.refugeeactiongroup.com/download?id=MTg=

The **Refugee Action Group** has established an out-of-hours **Immigration Detention Emergency Helpline 0800 400 495** www.refugeeactiongroup.com/content.jsp?id=Nw==

A Side issue:

How People Seeking Asylum in NI are Housed

The campaign against the detention in prison of some people in the asylum system, prior to 2005, has sometimes led to misunderstanding about the treatment of all people who seek sanctuary in NI. Unlike GB or RoI there is no dispersal. People applying for asylum here usually live in Belfast, where they have access to support organisations. There is no direct provision of state-run accommodation. They may start off in a hostel but are then allocated either houses or flats in the privately rented sector. They receive a small amount of cash support for food etc. While many people are appreciative that they can live in the community and receive a little financial support, some are failed by the system. Destitution occurs through delays in accessing support, glitches in the system and the fact that failed asylum applicants, who cannot be sent home, may lose their benefits completely.