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Special Edition
**Migration, Nationality and
Detention**

As a child I travelled a lot due to my father's job, a chemical engineer working for Shell. For me, travelling to the UK was not by choice. In 2005, I joined the ranks of people seeking asylum in this country. The UK is signed up to the Geneva Convention and the European Convention of Human Rights. Some people consider these human rights conventions to be an administrative nuisance. I agree there are people who do take advantage of human rights laws but I will also argue that there are a lot more people for whom this protection is their only life line, from Russian oligarchs fleeing to England, to the Tamils in south east Asia and sub-Saharan Africans looking for a safe haven. I am one of those people who fled to the UK seeking protection. I am going to detail my journey through the immigration estate, exemplifying with snippets of scenarios that I remember. While writing this article I could not resist discussing my experience without offering an opinion on my view of the implementation of immigration control procedures.

I claimed asylum on arrival in England in 2005. I was involved in human rights work, following in my father's footsteps. He was unfortunately murdered whilst campaigning for election as the Member of Parliament for his local area upon retirement from Shell, having served Shell for 25 years. He was campaigning against a high-ranking government minister. I was also then persecuted for human rights campaigning. I fled my country with the assistance of a very loyal relative, who used his connections in neighboring Kenya to find temporary refuge. While I did not expect my final destination to be London, my uncle was able to put me in touch with colleagues of his who facilitated my journey there.

I went through the administrative rigors of establishing my reasons for gracing the United Kingdom with my presence. I was then sent away to live in a hostel in south London with about 200 other asylum seekers. The day I was detained I received a letter from the Home Office requesting me to attend an interview to verify my biometric details. The letter asked me to turn up at 9am in the morning the following day, which I did. After waiting for about 10 hours, I was starting to get anxious and agitated; I had not eaten all day, I was worried I would miss dinner and signing in at the hostel (not signing in meant losing your place). At 6.45pm, I was called up to the counter and told to go through to the back office. As I made my way to the

back office I was faced with four private security personnel who ordered me to remove my belt and shoes, I was then frisked. My personals were sealed and tagged in a plastic see-through bag and sent to the waiting area. I asked one of the immigration officers present at the time what was happening and her reply was 'we are going to transfer you to a different hostel where we shall be able to look at your case in detail'. This calmed me down and I complied throughout the process. At this stage, I have to emphasise that I do not and have never had a criminal record. I had always complied and was sure I had nothing to worry about. No stretch of the imagination could have prepared for what I was about to go through.

On arriving at the centre, I was shocked by the exterior of the 'hostel': high walls with barbed wire on them, triple lock gates, security buffer zones and tiny windows — a fortified hostel. We waited outside the centre gates for about 45 minutes as the vans ahead were processed. It was now our turn to go through. The tall gates were clanked open, the driver drove into the buffer zone, switched off the engine, and waited. We were counted and paperwork was exchanged. We remained in the buffer zone for about 15 minutes. At this point my mind was racing. Why was I here? Why so much security? Was I on the set of an upcoming James bond film? We entered the facility and I was led to reception, where we proceeded to wait for about three hours. We were offered a drink of water from the water cooler type cups and a choice of chicken or tuna sandwiches — I chose the tuna. I had been eating combinations of chicken at the hostel and did not want any more chicken. We were fingerprinted again (my first experience of this was at the HO) and I wondered why security at the centre could not access biometric details remotely to save us what would turn out to be routine finger printing throughout my stay. The waiting room was very clinical, white walls, tiny windows and a distant television holstered in a top corner — I felt like was waiting for surgery, only I had not been told of this upcoming procedure.

At about 2am, I made my not so grand entrance into Harmondsworth Immigration Removal Centre (IRC) Wing B — my heart sank! It was late at night and people were wandering around like lost souls — I wandered around too, another lost addition to the population. People were dotted around in the TV rooms, playing cards and elderly men hunched in corners — I had never seen elderly men sob in such a way. My cellmate was a very nice guy and polite, but he

was clearly very depressed — he was a cutter! Everyone knew. I never saw him cut himself but new and old scars were obvious to everyone. I did not sleep that night.

There was a subtle pecking order. Groups (some may call them gangs!) were led by detainees who had been to prison. They had the experience of functioning in a custodial environment with extensive networks across IRCs. Most of the IRC population at that time was of African descent, and African groups were the most dominant. I had really long dreadlocks and I was of a fairly large build — an appearance that offered me some protection against other groups, as simply by my appearance people thought I was affiliated with one of the groups. This look did not serve me well in court or at HO interviews.

One of the worst things I experienced as a resident of the IRC estate was the movement between centres. Imagine having to move house every three months and on occasions every other month, and having to almost instantaneously integrate within a new community. In the IRC estate I had the added benefit of free removal services.

One incident I remember happened on a Friday night. The others had been playing bingo (bingo was not my thing), while we finished off a table tennis game with one of the officers. I sent notes to my friends in other wings through the cleaners who had access to other cleaners in the other wings, asking them to meet in the yard for a lunchtime game of football the next day.

'Bang up!' the officer shouted. I grabbed a few left-over apples and playing cards and entered my cell ready for that dreadful lock up — I hated it! Everyone hated bang up. Chances were if nothing had transpired during the day — bang time inspired the feelings of dread. Anyway, once in the cell it was back to normal bang up routine, watch the distant 14-inch television, play cards and talk about the first meal we would have on release. Personally, a nice cold Guinness was all I wanted.

At about 4am, I heard the cell door open. We both woke up, looked up at the same time — not knowing which one of us was leaving. I was in Colnbrook IRC at this point. 'Which one of you is 45991?' the officer inquired. I responded. 'Pack up your things, you will be escorted over to reception,' he continued. It would not have been wise to question my move amidst three

officers at that time of the night. I dreamily complied. About 15 minutes later I was walking through the yard with all my worldly possessions — a half torn rucksack containing a toothbrush, some crumbled biscuits and a massive load of papers from the Home Office about my case that I never read.

Whilst in the van one of the other detainees informed us we were going to Dungavel IRC in Scotland. Others speculated we had a charter flight waiting. Sure enough, our destination was Dungavel, 12 hours from Colnbrook, London. I spent the night in Dungavel, was issued with removal directions (RDs) early the following morning and by 8pm of the same day, I was in the van again heading back to Colnbrook IRC. On my immediate return to Colnbrook, I was told to pack up again to be transferred to a Heathrow

airport holding room. Luckily, by this time I had a solicitor.

Dungavel IRC was one of the most humane centres I had been to: staff were polite and helpful, there was more freedom of movement and Border Agency staff there were extremely helpful and understanding. They seemed to understand that asylum seekers were not criminals. This was very comforting and I felt at home there.

My solicitor at the time suggested I was transferred to Dungavel for purely administrative purposes since my solicitor would not have jurisdiction in Scotland to appeal my RDs. Personally, I did not know what to believe, but I

thought it was a bit odd to be driven 12 hours to be issued RDs and then returned to the same centre the next day.

I think there are convenient administrative procedures in the systems that are attractive to Border Agency staff but cause absolute untold misery to detainees. One would argue that a country has every right to put procedures in place for the efficient management of claimants for the good of the country. This for me is a tough call, but we have to remember that most of the asylum seekers (especially those without criminal convictions) in IRCs, many of the asylum seekers are released and will live with the general population. If such immigration procedures are the norm, what are we saying to newcomers to this country about British society? We share sidewalks and roads with former/present asylum seekers, some of whom will probably treat you in hospital or drive you home after a late Friday night. Next time you have a

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kebab, order Chinese or Indian or conga at the carnival or have a Cornish pasty, think of the richness diversity brings to a community.

IRCs have long periods of uneventful days, periods when nothing of significance happens and it is just going through the motions: sleep, dinner, chess ... sleep, dinner, pool and so on. Following periods of dullness, there are short periods of high intense drama, enough to compensate for the lulls in the week. One particular moment I remember vividly happened 15 minutes before bang up. One of our wing mates who did not interact much with anyone was mercilessly taunted as he had a last minute shower. Having had enough of the taunts he went over to his cell, changed into clothes, and walked over to the group that had been taunting him. No sooner had he reached them than the punches started raining on him. At this point, everyone was out of their cells watching in horror ... I (and a few others) wanted to intervene but I was advised against intervention by my cellmate who had spent about three years in prison and had been detained for more than a year. He told me you should never intervene in a prison fight, otherwise you risk 'tagging' yourself. So we watched helplessly for those intense five minutes as Charles was 'jumped'. Then one of them stepped away for a second to reveal a

concealed weapon, which we later found out was a shank made from a plastic fork. Charles was mercilessly 'shanked' in full view of CCTV. These incidents, terrifying as they were, were commonplace. We all hoped we would never be jumped but in IRCs even the slightest altercation with the wrong person could get you 'jumped'. Then there were nightly deathly screams from people banged up with hostile cellmates, attempted suicides, detainees with mental health issues made worse by their personal circumstances, not to mention protests from people picked up in the early hours from their cells for whatever reasons.

Habeas corpus was virtually unheard of in IRCs. It was quite ironic to be asked to prove my case when I did not have sufficient means of communication; the internet was heavily restricted, at the time mobile phones were not allowed, and I did not know a single person on the outside. Besides, buying change from one of the detainees to use the telephone was expensive: £3 in change could cost as much as £2 depending on how urgently you needed to make the phone call, so I was not surprised when I failed at every bail and case hearing for the whole seven months I was detained with no legal representation.

At this stage my asylum case took a back seat as I just lived day to day.

The duration of my detention was spent in four: IRCs Harmondsworth, Colnbrook, Dungavel, and Dover, and then there were the countless times I spent at Heathrow airport's holding facilities. Around my fourth month into detention I was guaranteed to know enough detainees wherever I was transferred.

The day I was released was one of the happiest days of life. I was at Dover IRC at the time and had to make my way to London. Seating on the train from Dover with my HMP see through bags, rough dreadlocks and a tattered IRC issue sweat suit — I had a whole triple seat to myself. Fitting comfort for a newly released asylum seeker, I thought! Nothing to do with the fact that no one would sit next to me — and this was around 5pm rush hour time.

The next day after my release I registered on the electoral register and have voted in every election ever since. A legacy law that allows Commonwealth citizens to exercise their right to vote in local elections in the UK enabled me to. Just imagine if every Commonwealth asylum seeker exercised this right? Would politicians take more notice of the plight of asylum seekers? Or would the public be so outraged by this legacy law that it would

have to be revised? I reserve my opinion on this one.

On occasions, I have been called upon to support on inspections as an experienced IRC 'service user'. I have had the privilege of gaining a holistic understanding of the challenges involved in managing high volumes of immigrants that have to be processed in IRCs some of whom have serious criminal pasts. In all honesty, I have great sympathy for staff within IRCs that have to work in these very challenging environments. Sometimes detainees will take their frustrations out on staff with no regard for consequences. One serious incident I remember at Colnbrook was when a detainee slashed an officer's face. I have no idea what happened to the member of staff or detainee after the incident. The prison-like infrastructure in most IRCs further exacerbates the situation. In contrast, I noticed centres such as Dungavel and Dover that had more of a homestead design were more pleasant environments for both staff and detainees. I also noticed that centres with experienced staff, that is former (or present) prison officers as at Dover and long-serving locally based staff as at Dungavel, were more likely to be pleasant environments. I believe in part this was due to the

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presence of staff with solid experience of managing people in custodial environments. Perhaps, custodial services in the immigration estate should be entrusted to fully trained and experienced prison officers. IRCs are prisons in all apart from their legal definitions. Maybe Dungavel should be used as a model for all IRCs? How about ensuring all IRC staff undergo training equivalent to that of prisons officers?

After release, I spent another four years signing on at the Home Office. This was a dreadful experience despite the fact that I had registered with my local borough, was an engineering student and complied fully with the Border Agency. None of that counted in my favor. Every Friday I had to sign on and the threat of re-detention was ever present. The thought of going back to detention was terrifying, but I kept signing on. I had developed a strategy of getting in all my university assignments handed in the day before I had to sign and I always made sure I had a drink with my friends the day before, prepared my emergency contacts and took some money in change, just in case I was re-detained. This was my weekly routine for about three years after release.

I am now a permanent resident of the UK. I graduated in 2010 with a 2:1 in materials engineering and am currently teaching physics. I spent four years completing my engineering degree after release and have been conferred with the right to use the 'Eng' postfix after my name, something some of my students find intriguing. 'Sir! Why are you teaching when you are an engineer?'. My response is 'because you are in year 10 and you need to concentrate on your exams.' Not the fact that the manufacturing industry in the UK has been on the decline and we need to train more scientists to push innovation and invention in the country.

People have previously asked me whether I am angry at having been through this experience and my response is 'not in the slightest'. I have met amazing people on my journey from being known as detainee number 45991 to Engineer Kizza. I have made

wonderful friends in the UK, people who empathised with my plight, people that in my view were the true reflection of British society. These friends have inspired a very strong sense of achievement and Britishness in me (though I will support my country of origin in the Olympics). I feel that I want to be woven into the fabric of this country, teach a subject I have loved all my life and contribute to the wellbeing of a country that has given me so much. I can only wonder what would have become of me if I did not have this support.

I am proud to be able to give something back to UK society by teaching future generations, through charity work I have done and by supporting inspections. Amazingly, my local borough is such a strong believer in my conviction to contribute to society that they have consistently reminded me over the years when and how to pay my council tax.

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In these times of austerity, some (including settled immigrants) may be threatened by immigration. Talk of revising or scrapping clauses in the human rights legislation is driven in my view by knee jerk reactions to tabloid headlines. In my view, tweaking human rights clauses is bound to affect all Humans, not only immigrants, keyword here is Human. Personally, I believe current legislation if implemented correctly is solid enough to protect us all.

My journey has taken me to the darkest corners of the UK and shone light on some of the brightest, most inclusive communities I have ever lived in. I recall decent IRC staff with whom I played table tennis, shared a joke and followed diligently to the waiting vans; I also recall friends who offered me accommodation and financial support. As I prepare for the start of the academic year in September, I am very conscious of the fact that I need to use all my experience to instill a strong sense of responsibility to mankind in my students, or to quote Confucius 'Consideration for others is the basis of a good life, a good society'.