

They all belong to Glasgow

From a conversation in early January with Ahmed Khan, who has been peacefully protesting the dawn raids and forced removals of asylum claimants in Glasgow.

Ahmed Khan: I'm a consultant psychiatrist. I've been doing the solitary protest at Glasgow's Brand Street immigration removal centre since June 2005, when I was the only one there. There are now groups protesting, especially on a Saturday, although I'm not a member or affiliate of anything.

The Home Office building at Festival Court on Brand Street, Ibrox is where asylum seekers are forced to sign on every week with their family, and whenever else they're called. They only get 70% of the minimum social security. It's where the immigration snatch squad is based that conducts dawn raids on asylum families, forcibly removing them from their homes. When the families walk in to Brand Street to report they are very, very scared as they don't know if they're coming out again. People go in to sign on and some leave handcuffed in a van, taken to one of the immigrant prisons like Dungavel or Yarls Wood, before being deported. It's very unpredictable but the families have been saying that if they know there are people outside supporting them it makes them feel better. When you go to Brand Street, especially on a Saturday, you see families with children, toddlers, babies forced to queue up from early in the morning to report. If the general public were made to stand outside and see this they wouldn't tolerate it. They wouldn't be able to live with it.

I'm not there as a political agitator, I'm there from a humanist point of view. The first time I protested I had a placard I found in the street that said, "No To Detention", and the police tried to arrest me—they regularly harassed and intimidated me. The authorities are so upset about the weekly Saturday protests that they're telling families not to come to report on that day any more. The trade union for immigration staff in Brand Street (Public and Commercial Services Union) are panicking, apparently Glasgow has become the most difficult city in the UK for the immigration department to work in. "Group 4 Securicor Justice Services were awarded a five year contract, which began in April of 2005, by the Home Office to provide escort and removal services for the Immigration & Nationality Directorate." A couple of months ago in front of witnesses, Securicor threatened to kill me and have been charged with threatening behaviour—obviously they still stand and growl at me. I put up with abuse every single week, but like I said one person can make a difference. Now there's lots of us and we're causing them to run scared.

We blockade the dawn raid vans at 4am every

morning. Since we've been there they haven't been able to carry out a single dawn raid. The dawn raids are carried out by immigration—about fifteen of them turn up, wearing balaclavas, black helmets and full body armour, and they kick your door down at 4 or 5am and storm in. There are also police attached to Brand Street to arrest anyone who physically tries to stop a deportation. Instead, when they suddenly open the gates at Brand Street and a raids van drives out at maximum speed we jump out in front of it, and if you've got your back turned to them hopefully they'll think twice before running you down.

In contrast, the local Helen Street police have actually been very sympathetic—they're the ones that form the big lines of police when we attempt to stop the raids vans leaving. I've seen the police in action many times, and this is the most sympathetic I've seen them. Initially they would actively voice their sympathy but about a month ago they stopped, but their faces are still saying this is disgusting, we don't want to be here.

You could say in general we live this stupid ignorant life, coming to coffee shops, doing what we're told. But when you go to Brand Street you see control at its most raw and physical, then you can see it in terms of the propaganda war being carried out by the government against essentially the weakest, most vulnerable people in this society, because they have no rights. All we're doing, one way or another, is fighting to give them basic human rights.

When the changes to asylum legislation came into force in 2004, it seemed they were detaining everyone at random. And because many didn't have access to legal representation it was difficult to know how many. It's still unclear how anyone is selected—people have been detained before their cases have even been processed! Immigration go out early morning, they grab people and take them. The government uses the phrase "administrative removal" for deportations. According to the UN: "the methods employed to effect removals should be consistent with human rights requirements and failed asylum seekers should be dealt with humanely" and that "specially designed return programmes for children should be established which incorporate the necessary safeguards".¹ So, someone bursting into your house at 4am in the morning, dragging you out in your night-clothes, handcuffed, leaving the door wide open with all your possessions inside, dragging away your children, putting you into vans, driving you four to five hundred miles to Yarls Wood on the outskirts of Bedford (because we made such a fuss about Dungavel)... essentially it's terror tactics.

"On 22 September, the First Minister spoke out on dawn raids on Scottish asylum families like the Vucaj family. On 13 September, this family was subjected to a terrifying dawn raid by a sixteen strong immigration snatch squad. Mr Vucaj and 17 year old Elvis were handcuffed and Saida, 13 years old, thought she was still dreaming.

"Despite condemnation from every section of Scottish society, the immigration raids have not stopped.

"On 14 October 2005, the Kupeli children, Suna (9) and Yagmar (6), pupils at Blackfriars Primary School, Gorbals, were dragged from their beds at dawn by a twelve strong immigration snatch squad. Their mother and father were both handcuffed and the family was taken separately in caged vans to Brand Street Immigration Office and then to Yarls Wood Removal Centre, Bedfordshire. (The family were bailed on the 9th November, making it very questionable as to why they were detained in the first place.)

"Two days after this shameful behaviour, Tony



McNulty, Immigration Minister went onto BBC Newsnight (16 October) and defended the tactics of dawn raids, despite widespread condemnation—including protests by executive ministers and the Children's Commissioner, Kathleen Marshall. Mr McNulty went onto say that "We are not knocking down doors at four in the morning". He claimed that most of the removals took place between 0530 and 0700 am, as if this made any difference to the terror felt by families too scared to sleep in this city."

Robina Qureshi, Director, Positive Action In Housing (PAIH)

In the Red Road flats in the north of the city to which a number of families have been "dispersed", the women wake up at four every morning and put their coats on (so at least they'll have a coat). Everything's packed, everything's by the door ready to go. And that's why we're setting up unions to mount early morning watches—at least people will know what's happening to each other. Things will get more organised with the passage of time, but an issue is that it's actually against the law for asylum seekers to resist and oppose what's happening to them. If they get politically involved they could be deported just like that.

Tom Harris, the Glasgow South MP, has taken it upon himself to mount a campaign of persecution of asylum seekers, seeking to cut off money from charities working with them, such as PAIH, by saying they are carrying out a political act in helping them. This would be against the rules governing their charitable status. Meanwhile the Charity Commission has actually placed greater positive emphasis on the campaigning activities that charities can undertake.² The problem is they deliberately keep the law vague, and if ever it's tested they change it very quickly. They have this point about how you've got to declare you're an asylum seeker when it is "practicable", which is there as a tool to discriminate.

"Say the Vucaj family they deported, maybe things might have changed a wee bit now. But when these people left that country seven or eight year ago, that was the position they left the country in. They fled for their lives and their children's. If you look at the Vucaj family, particularly the younger ones, half of them can't speak the language of the country they're being deported to. Especially the young lassie, the only schooling she's been through is here in Drumchapel. And with her school mates she was integrated into Scottish society, culture; her music, her dress, this is what she knew. I think it's very, very unfair, and inhumane... Here's another sad aspect: in respect to the armed forces the recruiting level has dropped drastically in the last few years, yet the young fella there was going into the army next year. He was already signed up for it, that was his ambition, to become a soldier in a Scottish regiment... We're crying

Brand Street protest images: Gareth Harper photoecosse.net



out for qualified people at all levels and yet we're throwing these people out. It defies common sense and logic. Bureaucracy gone mad."

Paddy Hill, Miscarriages of Justice Organisation (MOJO)

The whole refugee issue is surrounded by ignorance. Essentially what the government has been doing the last couple of years is making you scared of things you shouldn't be scared of, and not telling you about things you should be scared of. The general public are ignorant of what's going on and even the existence of Brand Street. Secondly, it's ignorance of racism—what motivates the system here is out-and-out racism. I don't see any white faces going in to report at Brand Street. You don't meet any Australians or New Zealanders. Scotland's First Minister Jack McConnell has recently gone to the US and Canada on this 'Fresh Talent' tour to try to increase the number of people coming to live and work in Scotland, while they're detaining and deporting the people who want to be here!

Variant: In January the NHS Employers' organisation voiced concern at confirmed poaching of staff from other countries for the health service.³

AK: The so-called brain drain. For example, with my job they actively go out to countries and offer them jobs here, security, money... Sub-Saharan Africa has one psychiatrist per million people. Nigeria has two psychiatrists, when there's something like 2,000 Nigerian psychiatrists working in the UK. They're trying to take away talented people who can help those countries, bring them here, put them into dead end jobs; they're doing the donkey work here. New Labour claim they've issued more work permits than ever before.⁴ On the other hand they don't want refugees from underdeveloped countries, even though many are university educated.

Another recent problem is the removal of the right to work; forcing people into destitution and making them homeless. This is just a way of demoralising and destroying people. I met a man a week ago who's been living in Glasgow for seventeen years. Suddenly twelve months ago they told him they were deporting him, and they made him homeless and jobless. Now he is absolutely destitute. But because he's lived here so long he has social contacts and support, unlike most refugees. An effect of this policy that really saddens me is that in the early morning in a couple of a south side streets there are illegal labour markets.

In 2000 the government claimed that the cost of supporting asylum seekers, including legal aid, welfare benefits, housing, health and education was £597 million, or 0.17% of total Government spending (Hansard, 12 April 2000, 227W)—while in 2002 immigrants contributed £2.5 billion more to the state than they receive in benefits and state services (Gott & Johnson 2002).

The most recent problem is, for a six month period, offering people who claimed asylum before the end of December up to £2,000 to withdraw their claims or appeals and to leave. This "cash" would somehow be paid in instalments over twelve months. The picture of a further £1000, possibly funnelled to NGOs, for "education, job training or setting up a business", gives a false impression of an overall situation that holds no danger for anyone. "Incentivising" people, as they call it, does not make them safe, and the term "voluntary" becomes meaningless if they are returning to danger. We've been trying to tell people don't think of this—our concern is the moment you give them your details it will be treated as acquiescence.

Just now we're organising the Red Road flats into unions and attempting to organise Pollokshaws. They are already organised in Knightswood, where there's the Glasgow Girls, who won the Scottish Campaign of the Year Award at the Scottish politician of the year ceremony. They're a group of young women aged about 14 to 15 from Drumchapel High School who came together to campaign against the deportations of their friends and neighbours. They organised



Knightswood into a refugee union, formed a database of everyone there, and the kids in school formed support groups so when the Vucaj family were detained they responded immediately.

"Mr McConnell wanted to have a private meeting with us. So we started talking to him and expressed the issues. I looked in his eyes and I begged him, 'Please help us.' He said he would see what he could do. He looked like he understood. He gave us so much hope and we had so much faith in him. But after that we went to the parliament again because the Vucaj family were taken away. That time Mr McConnell did not meet us. Saida Vucaj wanted to talk to him. I was upset. She is just a 13-year-old girl and she was saying please help us. It was a horrible feeling. We've pictures of us crying from then.

"I really thought he would help us. But obviously there's no help from him. He didn't just let me down, he let me and all the other asylum seekers down."

Sunday Herald, Dec 11 2005, Amal Azzudin, aged 15, Glasgow Girls

The Girls went to a meeting at the Scottish Parliament with Jack McConnell and said to him you lot are all talk, what are you actually going to do for the right of all young people to stay in Scotland, and against deportations? Since they were a group of youngsters who basically put McConnell on the spot they got a lot of publicity. McConnell publicly agreed with them that the dawn raids were outrageous... blahdeblah... what everyone wanted to hear. And when it looked like the Scottish Parliament might act the Immigration Minister Tony McNulty was dispatched from Westminster and McConnell stopped talking like that. The parliament's political impetus to deal with this situation stopped, but more and more people are organising.

"Today the immigration officers came in my house at 6am. First they knocked on the door, then someone said 'open the door now, I am from the Immigration Service'.

"I am not that sure how many of them there were at my front door but it looked like 15 to 17 of them. When my dad opened the door all of them split up. About four women came into my room, some went in with my dad, some with my brothers.

"They handcuffed my dad and my big brother. They never let me and my mum see my brother and dad. The immigration officer told us to pack. I saw my mum crying. At the same time I was crying too. I was shaking. I was tired. I was scared when I saw them because they were telling us to get up and one of them told me to tell my mum that we had to leave the UK that Friday.

"When they came [referring to dawn raid] I just jumped up, thinking what are these four people doing in my room? I was dead scared, you know, I was not thinking, all my good clothes are in my house, I forgot, I left my new clothes and took my old ones, just tired, never expected it, they just said get up. I was shaking, I was tired, I wanted my mum. But my mum was crying in the other room. Here, my mum says I get scared in the middle of the night, I wake and scream some nights ... As soon as I wake up I can't remember why I'm scared, but I feel scared.

"Life in Yarl's Wood every single day is becoming more boring. It is. I'm here three weeks and it's like brain

damage, because you're trapped inside.

"It feels like I've done something wrong to be in a prison. I can't hardly eat, only once a day, because, honest, I'm very, very depressed.

"My mum's depressed, crying in bed all day, but she's hanging there. I'm not joking, I'm scared if my mum gets sick, she was already sick with worrying about our case in Glasgow for five years. My dad, he is the same as my mum, very depressed. His eyes are red, his head is pure thumping. But we just have to hang on there, keep strong.

"I heard about my girls meeting the First Minister. Is he helping? I haven't been to the Scottish Parliament, but I could go one day. Have you been there?

"If I saw the First minister, I would just say: 'Hi, how you doing? I hope you and your family is very well. And if you help me and my family, I would thank you so much.'

"How could I forget life in Glasgow? I love my Glasgow, I remember going shopping with my friends, having fun, listening to music in my own room, not worrying, having my own space.

"If we come back to Glasgow, I want to finish the book, 'The Ragged Boy', with our teacher Mr Turnball. Anyway, I'm writing my own book now in here—I don't know how my book finishes, but I'll see tomorrow what's gonna happen.

"The government might say that Kosovo is safe, but if only they lived there for just two days they would change their minds. Two days there feels like five years. The British government just don't understand. That's why I am angry. But what can I do? I am just a child."

Saida Vucaj, aged 13

Saturday morning vigils at the Brand Street Immigration Centre: Immigration and Nationality Directorate office, Festival Court, 200 Brand Street, Glasgow G51 1DH. Nearest Underground, Cessnock.

Notes



1. UNHCR: 'UK White Paper on Asylum and Immigration: "Secure Borders, Safe Haven"' UNHCR London 18 March 2002, www.unhcr.org.uk/legal/positions/UNHCR%20Comments/comments_WP2002.htm
2. www.charity-commission.gov.uk/publications/cc9.asp
3. www.guardian.co.uk/uk_news/story/0,3604,1677505,00.html
4. www.scottishlabour.org.uk/freshtalentspeech/

No Border Network Glasgow

www.openborders.org.uk

Positive Action in Housing

www.paih.org

National Coalition of Anti-Deportation Campaigns

www.ncadc.org.uk

Stop deporting children

www.standup4children.org

Scotland Against Criminalising Communities

www.sacc.org.uk