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## Mothers detained in immigration centre hold 'naked' protest

By Emily Dugan  
 Friday, 11 April 2008

A group of mothers held in the Yarl's Wood immigration centre have staged protests over the extended detention of children. They argue that locking up minors is cruel and say being kept in close confinement has caused outbreaks of viruses.

Many of the women, who have been awaiting deportation from the Bedford immigration removal centre for months, stood naked in a corridor and have gone on hunger strike in a bid to make their demands heard.

The detention of children is increasingly contentious, following the Independent Asylum Commission's verdict that the practice is "wholly unjustified".

It is understood that 15 mothers took part in the protest at the family wing of Yarl's Wood yesterday morning. The incident followed a period of confrontation between detainees and officers, as the women demanded to have their concerns heard by the UK Border Agency.

The confrontation began on Wednesday night after 11 detainees tried to stop a mother and child being removed. The action was in protest at not being granted time with immigration officials to address the issue of young detainees. Yesterday a pregnant Nigerian woman who led the protest was allegedly parted from her six-year-old son and taken to a solitary wing.

At least 15 women protested outside the staff office, demanding to know where she had been taken and reiterating requests for a fair hearing. Several of them removed their clothes to mark their disgust at the "imprisonment" of their children.

A spokesperson for Serco, the company which runs Yarl's Wood, said discussions had taken place between residents and staff, but "no significant protest" had occurred.

Mercy Guobatia, 22, from Nigeria, was one of the mothers who stood naked in the centre as a symbol of the inhumane way she felt they were treated there.

"I took my clothes off because they treat us like animals. We are claiming asylum, we're not animals. They treat us as if we've done something terrible."



She said that both her daughters, one aged six months and a two-year-old, have lost weight and been consistently ill since arriving at Yarl's Wood. "Just five days after arriving they started being ill," she said. "They have had diarrhoea and been vomiting ever since. It's because we are kept so close together in detention." Ms Goubatia pleaded with the Border Agency to consider a more humane policy.



Serco would not comment on individual cases, but a spokes-man confirmed: "There has been a localised outbreak of a common vomiting virus at Yarl's Wood Immigration Removal Centre. This is being dealt with by our medical staff who are in close liaison with the Health Protection Agency and the local primary care trust.

Donna Covey, chief executive of the Refugee Council, said: "We remain absolutely opposed to the detention of children under any circumstances. The evidence shows it is physically and emotionally harmful for children to be locked up this way, and there can be no justification for it." Sources at the centre say many women are on hunger strike and more protests are planned.

A UK Border Agency spokes-person said: "Families with children are detained only where absolutely necessary and for as short a period as possible and in designated accommodation."

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