

Black Women's Rape Action Project (BWRAP)

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David Wood, Strategic Director
Criminality and Detention Group,
UK Border Agency
2nd Floor, Seacole,
2 Marsham St,
London SW1P 4DF

17 March 2010

Dear David Wood,

Your 23 February 2010 letter is full of slurs and misinformation. We realise that this has become the standard for the government or agencies on their behalf, but feel compelled to respond to some of the points you raise.

1. In relation to the protest by women in Yarl's Wood on 8 February, you claim that we (Black Women's Rape Action Project) "*relied on sensationalist statements which were either exaggerated, or in many cases totally fabricated*". Twenty-five women have given entirely consistent statements to lawyers which are now the substance of legal claims about the events on 8 February. Their accounts speak of as many as 70 women being "*kettled*" in an airless corridor, denied access to toilets, so some women had to urinate on the floor, making conditions unbearable for all, and several women fainting. They said that some women who were desperate for air got through an unlocked window and were kept outside in the freezing cold. It was in this area that at least three were assaulted by a guard who has been identified by a number of women. Far from being offered food and water as you claim, women describe guards taunting them with their lunches. Some of what women describe was confirmed by SERCO manager Dawn Elaine, when she admitted to the press that women "*were locked for a whole afternoon*" in a corridor and that "*women were left to urinate on the floor*". (BBC Look East, Wednesday 10 March).

You'll have heard that Parliamentarians have expressed concern about the events of 8 February and the ongoing detention of vulnerable women. John McDonnell MP lodged an [Early Day Motion](#) which is so far signed by 40 MPs. [Alistair Burt](#) MP has also called for an inquiry by HM Inspector of Prisons. Have you written to them expressing your disappointment that they are relying on "*sensationalist*" "*fabricated*" statements?

You say that CCTV "*recorded the events in their totality*". We look forward to seeing the footage. Could you ensure that we are sent a copy of the complete and unedited tapes? Does the CCTV cover the area outside where women complain the worst violence from guards occurred? If not, you can hardly claim that the "*events in their totality*" were recorded.

You also say that the "*incident*" was witnessed by three members of the Independent Monitoring Board (IMB). Even before these events on 8 February, there were already serious questions about the independence, thoroughness and impartiality of the IMB. Women have reported that complaints raised with the IMB are not investigated and are most often referred back to SERCO staff. Women then face retaliatory action by guards for having complained. No wonder women no longer raise their complaints with the IMB. On 8 February, one woman described that she saw an IMB member counting how many women were in the "*kettled*" area. Through the glass she repeatedly asked him to go to the other side of the corridor where he could have witnessed what was happening to women who were being assaulted by one of the guards. He refused. Can you ensure we

are sent a copy of the IMB report of the events of 8 February, as we would like to compare it with the many reports from women about what happened?

2. On the question of detention, you speak of having to remove “. . . *persons with no basis of stay*”. The Home Office has spent years organising to ensure that people cannot establish a “*basis to stay*”. We work daily with women who have been denied adequate time and resources to gather and present evidence of the persecution they suffered. Some have suffered the kind of racism and hostility described compellingly by ex-Home Office caseworker Louise Perrett¹.
3. Like Parliamentary Under-Secretary Meg Hillier², you have no qualms about blaming women for their own detention: people “*spend longer periods in detention*” because they make “*late appeals against a decision to remove them*”. Many of the women we are in touch with have been forced to make a late appeal because they were blocked from pursuing legitimate claims at an earlier stage. If asylum decisions are correct, then why are so many injunctions being granted by Appeal Court Judges, even as late as when people are being put on the plane? Plus, two of the women on hunger strike are still in detention because the Home Office appealed after they won their UK immigration status. Why is the Home Office prolonging their detention in this way?
4. You lecture us that “*lawyers and NGOs have a duty to explain carefully the realities of [detainees] position and not to give them false hope*”. We have seen what happens to women when they are sent back. Two members of All African Women’s Group, based at our Women’s Centre, managed to make it back to the UK after being removed to their country of origin. Both bore the scars of torture. Others we have kept in touch with were abducted and raped. All are living underground, often in fear of their lives, distraught, destitute and traumatised. The government has shown no concern for the fate of the women it removes.

We are glad that our efforts are focussed on trying to protect women from rape and even murder. What are your efforts focussed on?

Yours sincerely,



Cristel Amiss

Cc John McDonnell, MP
Jeremy Corbyn MP,
Women in Yarl’s Wood IRC
All African Women’s Group
Legal Action for Women
Women Against Rape

¹ **The Guardian**, Tuesday 2 February 2010

² Our response to Hillier’s letter to MPs aimed at deterring them from signing the EDM is at: <http://womenagainstrape.net/content/action-women-3rd-week-hunger-strike-yarls-wood-irc>