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UK Border Agency targeted by Iranian hunger strikers May 10, 2011

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Six pro-democracy Iranian activists have been holding a protest against their possible deportation and for the rights of all asylum seekers by camping outside both Lunar House, the Home Office building in Croydon, and at Amnesty International's Offices in Clerkenwell, central London.

Keyvan Bahari, Mahyar Meyari, his brother Mehran Meyari, Kiarash Bahari, Ahmad Sadeghi-Pour and Morteza Bayat made the difficult journey to the UK to seek help and arrived with substantial evidence about their situation. Despite torture wounds covering their bodies and often-difficult-to-produce evidence, such as newspaper articles with photos identifying them as activists, all this was completely overlooked and all applications for asylum that have been decided for the group so far were rejected.

Some of the men were also victims of an unscrupulous immigration lawyer, who failed to translate and submit key evidence to their case owner, and in one case a mistranslation of a place of work lead to an "inconsistency" that seems to be the basis for refusal in that case.

All the hunger strikers apart from Mahyar, whose case is pending a decision on the 19th of May, are pushing for appeals even when some have exhausted their rights to do so under UK Border Agency (UKBA) terms. The group decided a hunger strike would be the best way to highlight their frustration over the hypocrisy of Western leaders and international media channels urging activists in Iran to continue the struggle against their oppression while failing to support them when they came to the UK to seek refuge. Iran's regime is often described as one of the most controlling in the world, with a dominant state media, corporal punishment for the worst crimes against the state and strict punishments for other crimes that human rights observers and activists have described as "disproportionate" or worse. The wave of protests against the Iranian regime started within hours of the announcement of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, being re-elected in the 2009 presidential election, elections that were widely described as "flawed" by international observers and members of counter-current political groups, mostly student groups, many of which are still in prison today for asking "where is my vote".

Former wrestling champion, Keyvan, one of the three protesters who has taken the added step of having his lips sewn together with fishing line to make a visible statement about their protest, said that it seems the West has "washed their hands" of the pro-democracy uprising, and "now that I'm stuck here and need help, they are nowhere."

The mainstream media coverage of the protest so far has focused on personal aspects of the hunger strikers, rather than the evidence of systematic failure to protect refugees, which is what their case has highlighted. The group has claimed that they have been routinely "ignored and dismissed" by the authorities since they arrived to seek refuge last year. Whilst this is commonly experienced by asylum seekers and pro-migration campaigners, it is part of the struggle that is not heard in society at large.

The Home Office has often been reported as not coping with the volume of work it has to undertake. After being described as "not fit for purpose" in 2006 by the then Home Secretary, John Reid, UKBA still routinely takes months to do what other organisations at most take a few weeks to do, such as replying to letters, and leaves asylum seekers cut out, uninformed and feeling powerless.

The Public and Commercial Services Union, which is the main union for UKBA workers, has recently warned of the "efforts to hand large elements of the casework currently being undertaken by civil servants...to the private sector." With a report of 300 employees of SERCO, a 'services company', to "undertake 'casework support' duties", whilst thousands of public sector UKBA jobs are being cut. SERCO Plc is a private corporation operating an

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international web of businesses, including prisons, immigration detention centres, nuclear facilities, services to the US National Security Agency, air traffic control systems, railways, hospitals and schools. They are part of the trend to privatise prisons in the U.S.A.

SERCO is one of the biggest employers in the security industry, and despite a history of notoriety for unjustifiable treatment of detainees, continues to grow, as it has done every year since flotation on the London Stock Exchange in 1988. In March this year, SERCO was in the world's media for the violent "show of force" the Sydney Morning Herald described after asylum seekers, who had been waiting nearly a year for their first interview, peacefully left the detention centre on Christmas Island, off the Australian mainland.

The UK saw the worst of SERCO when in February 2010, the horrifically casual "violent, racist, sexist and vindictive" behaviour of SERCO workers at Yarl's Wood detention centre near Bedford lead to a hunger strike and subsequent mass protests against SERCO guards by asylum seekers there, many of whom had fled torture, rape and destitution. In response, nearly a hundred women were "locked in a corridor for up to 8 hours without access to food, water, toilet or medical care. Many collapsed and about 20, who tried to climbed [sic] out of the windows, were beaten up and taken into isolation cells". Despite calls for justice from some MPs in the House of Parliament, the testimonies by Yarl's Wood detainees have failed to be used to hold any SERCO staff to account for their "racial, psychological and physical abuse...on the hunger strikers" Instead, the supposed 'ringleaders', were taken to Bedford police station and subsequently transferred to HMP Holloway in London, without being charged with any offence or brought before a judge.

The Home Office response to the current hunger strike in the streets of London is typically homogeneous and reads "These individuals were given every opportunity to make their representations to us as well as a right to appeal the decision to the courts. All of these individuals have had access to independent free legal advice as well as a designated UK Border Agency case owner who considered their case on its individual merit."

But what is especially appalling about the cases is that it highlights more than ever the structural abuse within the global system. These men have been subjected to severe personal ill-treatment (as officially required by authorities for people to be considered a refugee), but instead of being aided by apparent supporters of the pro-democracy campaign they were part of, those punishments that came soon after their role was revealed have effectively continued by a so-called 'democratic' authority in a foreign land where they knew fewer people to support them.

Having not eaten for over 30 days is starting to bring health worries, and some may suffer long term kidney damage, according to a nurse who visited them. The Croydon protesters have also been the target of racist abuse, when a man set fire to one of their sleeping bags and ripped up placards. It is not clear if this is linked to the posting of their location on fascist internet forums such as 'stormfront', as the police investigation is ongoing. They also hear daily abuse as people shout insults as they drive by. Yet despite being shaken in their tent and having fizzy drinks thrown at them, they are determined that their protest should continue until they are acknowledged by the Home Office in a way they deem appropriate to their cause and are hopeful that a demonstration called for this Friday in central London will help build support.

The demonstration is called jointly by the No Border Network, the Stop Deportations Network, SOAS Detainee Support and the Cambridge Migrant Solidarity Group. The march begins 2pm at Parliament Square, followed by protest outside the Home Office on Marsham Street between 3pm and 5pm. The hunger strikers hope to borrow wheelchairs from various organisations in order to be able to attend.

The groups involved in the demonstration are also regular visitors to the tents of the protesters, along with Iranian Green Movement activists and other sympathisers. All have been helping to collect signatures on a petition that will be handed to the Home Office, to bring water, charge phones, create leaflets to hand out and discuss tactics for the campaign as well as providing personal support and staying overnight to help deflect the worst abuse by potential aggressors. A solidarity network is being formed to help bring the campaign to a positive conclusion.

In pro-migration activism, campaigners increasingly have to fight to get the government to adhere to the laws it has signed up to. The triumph of the Western democratic model over fascism in the early 20th century, which led to the signing of the Geneva Convention of refugee rights in 1949, appears to now be subject to the modern migration figure management of neo-liberal interests. As one activist in Australia exclaimed about the current wave of rebellion by migrants across the world, "what do we expect when we treat people like animals to be locked up indefinitely while our too-few-officials manage the problem, often receiving "intelligence" from the very regimes from which people are fleeing?"

