

'This is worse than prison': a Zimbabwean detainee speaks

I have been in Haslar since February 1st this year. I was transferred here straight from prison, where I had served six months of a one-year sentence for working illegally as a care assistant. I had been working as a senior carer at an old people's home in Eastbourne for four years when the immigration department sent a police officer to arrest me because I had false paperwork. Before that, I had never been in trouble with the police, not even for anything minor. I only did it because I was desperate to stay in the UK where I can be safe with my wife and two sons, who are 10 and two. If I am sent back to Harare I fear for my life. The authorities there know that my family supports the Movement for Democratic Change — an opposition politician used my father's car during his election campaign. I was threatened, beaten and detained by the police there before I fled to the UK in 2003.

There is not a lot to do at the centre, so a lot of time is spent in the TV room. It is impossible to avoid Zimbabwe — you turn from BBC1 to BBC2, to Sky and Channel 4 News and it is everywhere, a reminder of what we could be sent back to. The other people here who don't come from my country can't understand why we are still being held here when they see and hear how bad the situation in Zimbabwe is. The worst thing is, they assume that we must have committed terrible crimes if we are still being kept here despite the Home Office having decided to stop all deportations to Zimbabwe.

Every morning I go to the library to read the newspapers. I couldn't believe it the other day when I read David Miliband saying that Zimbabwe was in crisis and likening Mugabe's regime to "sadism", and yet his government is keeping me locked up here. It's especially hard when you hear about terror suspects, accused of really awful crimes, being released on bail.

The judge in my case refused me bail, even though two friends had offered £1,000 each as surety. He said that because my wife lived in Yorkshire, 200 miles away from these friends, he could not be sure I would not abscond. But it is the Home Office's fault my wife is so far away — that is where they housed her when I was sent to jail and she got evicted because I was no longer paying the rent.

Being here is worse than being in prison. At least when you're in jail you have a leaving date. I don't know how long I will be here. Another Zimbabwean here, also a family man, will have been here for two years on June 27. I look at him sometimes and think: what if I am still here in two years' time?

It is difficult remaining optimistic. I keep hopeful by attending church every evening in the centre, and by talking to my wife on the phone. But I have broken down sometimes. I even contemplated suicide, but then I called my wife and she said that the only people to suffer if I was gone was her and my sons. I have been on medication for five or six months because of the stress.

I applied for asylum, but earlier this year a judge ruled that he didn't believe I really needed asylum. But I do. I don't know what will happen to me if I get sent back to Zimbabwe, but it will be bad news. I used to work at Harare airport, so there will be no chance of me getting through there unnoticed. I will certainly be interrogated, and then who knows what? Sometimes people simply disappear in Zimbabwe.

Interview by Helen Pidd in the Guardian 26th June 2008. By the time this was published the man was free.