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Professor Philip Alston
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Special Rapporteur on extreme poverty and human rights
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Dear Professor Alston,

Re: Written submission – Visit to the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland from 5 to 16 November 2018

We write in view of your visit to the UK in November 2018. In this submission, we address four specific questions under thematic issues A (General) and B (Austerity) with reference to the experience of asylum-seekers in the United Kingdom. We also enclose our research report entitled ‘A Hostile Environment?’ as an Annex.

(3) What are the most significant human rights violations that people living in poverty and extreme poverty in the United Kingdom experience? Please exemplify by referring to specific cases and relevant norms of international human rights law.

Asylum-seekers in heightened periods of poverty experience a number of significant human rights violations whilst in initial and dispersal accommodation. According to a Refugee Rights Europe research study carried out in January 2018 in an asylum accommodation centre in London, the residents faced the following human rights infringements during their time in the Home Office sponsored accommodation:

1. Universal Declaration of Human Rights, Article 3: Everyone has the right to life, liberty and security of person.

1.1. **Safety and security:** Only 16% of research respondents said they feel ‘safe’ or ‘very safe’ in their accommodation. While 21% said they felt ‘OK’, it is concerning that a whole 64% felt ‘unsafe’ or ‘very unsafe’. One 17-year-old said: “I feel scared sometimes. I don’t like this hostel, it is very bad.” Another said: “I have been diagnosed with post-traumatic stress because of what happened to me in detention in [my country of origin]. I don’t sleep well here. It’s very, very bad here for me – not just very bad.”

1.2. **Violence:** 97% had a functioning lock on their room. However, one respondent explained that this doesn’t make him feel any safer, because one of his roommates was violent towards him. He had reported this to the management on a number of occasions, but they simply told him to call the police who would remove the roommate for a few nights before returning him to the accommodation again. 30% said they had experienced verbal abuse in their accommodation, both by fellow residents and by the management or staff (such as cleaning staff). A slightly lower proportion, 21%, said they had experienced physical violence inside the accommodation. 3% said they preferred not to say whether they had experienced physical violence. This type of violence had been perpetrated by other residents and non-residents who would enter the building – usually at night – and threaten them. No physical violence by managers or staff was reported.

2. **Universal Declaration of Human Rights, Article 25(1): Everyone has the right to a standard of living adequate for the health and well-being of himself and of his family, including food, clothing, housing and medical care and necessary social services, and the right to security in the event of unemployment, sickness, disability, widowhood, old age or other lack of livelihood in circumstances beyond his control.**

2.1. Hygiene standards and cleanliness: 73% said their accommodation was ‘dirty’ or ‘very dirty’ when they moved in. Respondents said that cleaning staff attend the building regularly, but it continues to be below reasonable standards in terms of cleanliness. Photos shared with the researchers appear to corroborate this view, depicting unsanitary levels of mould and grime across ceilings, dirt around windows, and unsanitary bathrooms and kitchens.

2.2. Vermin: There appears to be a widespread problem with vermin in the accommodation. 82% of respondents said there were mice in their rooms. One respondent explained how the mice used to climb up his curtains and crawl across his clothing. One respondent said: “There are too many mice. Look at this, they ate my bag!”. 61% said they had seen one or more rats in the accommodation, but in most instances it appears that the rats were in the backyard rather than inside the building. Many respondents told the researchers about cockroaches in the kitchen. One man said he sometimes finds cockroaches in the microwave oven or the cupboards. Others exclaimed: “There are bugs and cockroaches. Too much in the kitchen!”, and “The kitchen is full of cockroaches. It’s very horrible.”

2.3. Mould and air quality: Respondents said there were mould and humidity issues in bathrooms and bedrooms. Photos shared with the research team appear to corroborate this information. One respondent explained that he is experiencing allergies and itchiness in his eyes and nose, which he believes is due to mould in his room. He said the symptoms worsened after one of the fires which filled his room with smoke and a strong odour that remained for several days. He reported his concerns about the mould to the management but they told him that this is a normal condition in the UK.

2.4. Overcrowding: There was a sense of overcrowding in the accommodation. One youth explained that he was sharing a small room measuring approximately eight square meters with two others, leaving little space for personal belongings. Only two respondents were staying in a room on their own; one of them explained that he had requested this due to his post-traumatic stress disorder which makes him shout in panic at night, and woke up his former roommates. He waited several months to be moved to his own room.

(6) Which areas of the United Kingdom should the Special Rapporteur visit in light of the poverty and human rights situation in those locations?

We would recommend visiting asylum accommodation centres in two key locations, London and Birmingham, in order to gain an understanding of the poverty and human rights violations experienced in this context. Refugee Rights Europe would be able to propose specific locations and facilitate the visits, in case of interest.

(7) Which individuals and organizations should the Special Rapporteur meet with during his country visit to the United Kingdom?

We would recommend meeting with asylum-seekers in asylum accommodation in London and Birmingham, as well as key organisations addressing the situation of refugees and asylum-seekers in situations of poverty and extreme poverty. Among the key organisations in the United Kingdom are: British Refugee Council, Scottish Refugee Council, and City of Sanctuary.

(11) Have the human rights of individuals experiencing poverty been affected by austerity measures?

It is our understanding that the human rights of asylum-seekers have been negatively affected by austerity measures. Over the past six years, initial and dispersal asylum accommodation has been contracted out by the UK Government to the three private companies G4S, Serco and Clearsprings under the so-called COMPASS contract. The contracts have received widespread public criticism with extensive media coverage detailing the unhealthy living environment created by poor quality accommodation. This is also documented in Refugee Rights Europe's aforementioned report 'A Hostile Environment?'.

Indeed, the Commons Public Accounts Committee has described such asylum accommodation as: "Unacceptably poor for a very fragile group of individuals and families." In early 2017, the Home Affairs Select Committee (under the chairmanship of MP Yvette Cooper) reiterated similar concerns and stated that the contract system was not working. The Committee called for major reform as it found the asylum accommodation provided by government contractors to be a "disgrace" and emphasised it was shameful that very vulnerable people have been placed in these conditions.

Along the same lines, a research study with asylum-seekers conducted by advocacy group Migrant Voice in Birmingham found poor health, mental health issues and high levels of stress allegedly caused by the poor standards in the accommodation centres.

The COMPASS contract is due to be replaced by the Asylum Accommodation and Support Services Contract (AASC) and the Advice, Issue Reporting and Eligibility Contracts (AIRE), which are currently out to tender and are due to be signed in November and December 2018.

As part of the new contracts, it will be of utmost importance that devolved Governments are able to oversee the delivery of these contracts and take responsibility for standards inspection regimes. Accommodation and facilities must take into account asylum-seekers' needs and provide pathways for identifying and responding to vulnerable people. The move-on period for newly recognised refugees must also be extended from 28 days, during which time many fall into homelessness and destitution. Further recommendations have been published by Asylum Matters at the City of Sanctuary, accessible [here](#).

We would like this written submission to be published on the website of the Special Rapporteur.

If we can be of any assistance to you by providing further information on this topic, please do not hesitate to get in contact.

Many thanks for your attention to these important matters.

Yours sincerely,



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