

THE MEDICAL CONSEQUENCES OF DETAINING AND CONTAINING CHILDREN

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Introduction

Médecins Sans Frontières / Doctors without Borders (MSF) is profoundly concerned by provisions in the UK Government's Illegal Migration Bill which drastically expand the use of immigration detention, including re-introducing the routine detention of children and families before removing them from the UK. MSF's medical teams around the world have witnessed how detaining and containing people seeking safety in high security, official and de-facto detention settings cause significant medical harm whilst stripping them of their dignity and humanity. This is particularly apparent in children.

This briefing note highlights the significant damage detention and containment inflict on children's health and well-being using medical evidence and testimony from MSF projects on the Greek islands and the Island of Nauru. Considering the devastation we have witnessed, MSF is particularly alarmed that the UK government cites Australia's offshore and detention policies and Greece's de-facto detention approach of containing people in large-scale centres as a model for its own policy¹. This briefing builds on the plethora of clear medical evidence that demonstrates the grave consequences of detaining children. It should serve as a warning against (re)introducing these plans in the UK.

It is important to consider that the serious medical and protection consequences of containment are intentional. These policies are designed to hold people whilst their status is determined, but also as a deterrent to those who dare to seek sanctuary in the UK. To detain and contain children is an affront to their health, welfare and safety and we believe that clause 10 and other provisions in the Bill will result in more experiencing serious harm. There are no circumstances in which children should be detained or contained. MSF condemns the UK government's regressive approach and opposes the Bill in its entirety.

Context in the UK: Preparing for mass containment

There is clear medical evidence that immigration detention is damaging to the mental health of those detained² and has long-lasting impacts, continuing even after release³. Children are particularly affected⁴. The Royal College of GPs, Royal College of Psychiatrists, Royal College of Paediatrics and Child Health, and the Faculty of Public Health have described the detention of children as "unacceptable" and say it "should cease without delay".⁵

Yet, under Clause 10 of the Illegal Migration Bill, currently moving through Parliament, anyone - including children with their families and lone children - who arrives in the UK irregularly will be detained immediately for a minimum of 28 days, with no recourse to bail or judicial review. They may be detained indefinitely until they

¹ The Guardian, '[Tories hail Greek migration policies as an example. Instead, they should serve as a warning](#)', April 2023; Tubakovic, T, Murray, P., Matera, M.; '[The UK's "stop the boats" policy shows a failure to learn from Australia's mistakes](#)', LSE Blog, (10 March 2023)

² Verhulsdonk, I., Shahab, M., & Molendijk, M. 'Prevalence of Psychiatric Disorders Among Refugees and Migrants in Immigration Detention: Systematic Review with Meta-analysis'. *BJPsych Open* 7(6) (2021); Bosworth M. 'Appendix 5: The Mental Health Literature Survey Sub-Review. Review into the Welfare in Detention of Vulnerable Persons: A Report to the Home Office' (2016); M von Werthern, K Robjant, Z Chui et al. 'The Impact of Immigration Detention on Mental Health: A Systematic Review', *BMC Psychiatry* 18: 382 (2018); Royal College Psychiatrists 'Position statement: The Detention of people with Mental Disorders in Immigration Detention' PS02/21, (April 2021)

³ World Health Organisation / Europe, '[Immigration detention is harmful to health – alternatives to detention should be used](#)' (May 2022); Helen Bamber Foundation, '[The impact of immigration on mental health](#)' (September, 2022).

⁴ Tosif, S., Graham, H., Kiang K, Laemmle-Ruff I, Heenan R, Smith A, Volkman T, Connell T, Paxton G. '[Health of Children who experienced Australian Immigration Detention](#)' (2023)

⁵ Royal College of GPs, Royal College of Psychiatrists, Royal College of Paediatrics and Child Health, and the Faculty of Public Health, '[Intercollegiate Briefing Paper: Significant Harm - the effects of administrative detention on the health of children, young people and their families](#)' (2009).

are removed to another country. Up to 45,000 children, including 15,000 unaccompanied children are likely to be detained within the first three years of the legislation coming into effect.⁶

Due to the current closed immigration detention capacity in the UK, it is probable that the majority of people will be contained in isolated former military barracks similar to those seen on the Greek islands and at Manston, Napier and Penally military sites in the UK. The sites have been described as ‘quasi-detention’ due to their large-scale, institutional nature and the presence of features found in closed detention settings.⁷ Evidence from the Greek and UK sites shows extremely poor living conditions, high levels of psychological and other medical conditions amongst residents, lack of privacy, unmet medical needs, and inadequate access to medical care.⁸ Despite this, the UK government continues with its plan to detain children and has not published information on what specific care will be provided to children with pre-existing or emerging health and/or protection needs.

The mental health torment of containment

Lesvos Island, Greece

Between 2018 and 2020 MSF ran a paediatric health project on Lesvos island, providing care to children trapped in the Moria reception and identification centre (RIC). Moria was characterised by chronic overcrowding and dangerous, unhygienic living conditions, a lack of access to essential services including medical care. People faced a lack of information about the asylum procedure and the indefinite nature of the containment. Most of those treated by MSF reported one or more instances of exposure to violence in their country of origin and/or during their migration journey.

During this time, MSF cared for an alarming number of children with deteriorating mental health, compounded by containment and the everyday structural violence of the RIC⁹. In 2018, MSF declared an ‘unprecedented mental health emergency’, calling for the urgent emergency evacuation of vulnerable people, especially children out of Moria¹⁰. Between 2019 and 2020, MSF treated 456 children with mental health problems, including 32 unaccompanied children. These children often displayed trauma- and fear-induced symptoms triggered by their environment in the hotspots. The main symptoms included: sleep disturbance and nightmares (39 %), generalised fear (24 %), behavioural regression and development delays (30 %), helplessness and detachment (25 %), and psychosomatic complaints, such as headaches, stomach aches and dizziness (10%). This often resulted in children experiencing impaired concentration, learning, interaction and play, lack of verbalisation or accident-prone behaviours, bed-wetting, and inability to control negative emotions.

“More and more of these children stop playing, have nightmares, are afraid to go out of their tents and start to withdraw from life. Some of them completely stop talking. With the increasing overcrowding, violence and lack of safety in the camp, the situation for children is deteriorating day by day. To prevent permanent damage, these children need to be removed from Moria immediately”.
MSF psychologist on Lesvos

There were alarmingly high rates of self-harm and suicidal acts among children. Out of the 180 MSF patients who had experienced self-harm, suicidal ideation or had attempted suicide, more than two thirds were children; the youngest of which was a six-year-old child. This suffering was exacerbated by daily stresses and constant fears, including navigating daily life in deplorable accommodation conditions, unaddressed medical needs, exposure to violence and insecurity and a lack of information on their legal status or length of confinement in the RIC. Furthermore, despite the serious nature of the mental health conditions treated by MSF, specialised care was not accessible for those trapped on the islands, placing these children at serious risk of harm.

⁶ This is based on [Refugee Council](#) projections, of up to 45,000 children, including almost 15,000 unaccompanied children, will have their claims deemed inadmissible and therefore will likely be detained within the first three years of the legislation coming into effect.

⁷ All-Party Parliamentary Group on Immigration Detention, ‘[Report of the Inquiry into Quasi-Detention](#)’ (2021)

⁸ Doctors of the World, MSF, et al. ‘[The Medical consequences of the new ‘Illegal Migration Bill’](#)’, (April 2023)

⁹ For further information, see MSF’s ‘[Constructing Crisis at Europe’s Border](#)’, (June 2021)

¹⁰ MSF Press Release, ‘[Increase in suicide attempts among child refugees on Lesvos](#)’, (18 September, 2018)

Among the 32 unaccompanied children treated in the paediatric clinic, 20 per cent had engaged in self-harming behaviour and 15 per cent experienced suicidal ideation.

'Just after the fire [in Moria] a girl came, and she was hitting me, and she was asking me if I could feel her pain...she told me that even if I gave her all the medication on the world [it would not help] as she must go back and witness those inhumane conditions every day. Many children who live in Moria withdraw from life; that means that they stop talking, they stop interacting with each other, some of them stop eating, there are many children that harm themselves and they want to end their lives. Moria is not a safe place for any child. We are in Europe and we are still traumatising their childhood every day'. MSF Psychologist, Lesvos

MSF staff observed that the significant rates of suicidal thoughts and self-harming were consequence of an unsafe environment, extended limbo and uncertainty. Based on staff observations, mental health conditions among children worsen the longer they are contained and have significant impact on the entire family and community. As people's sense of hopelessness intensifies, their mental health state worsens; MSF projects in detention and containment settings have found similarly high rates of suicide.

The island of Nauru

MSF worked on Nauru island providing mental healthcare for adult and child asylum seekers and refugees who had been removed and held there by the Australian government (a process known as 'offshoring', which the UK government has based its Rwanda policy on) from November 2017 – October 2018¹¹. Nauru stopped being a locked detention setting in 2015, but many MSF refugee and asylum seeker patients described the island as an 'open-air prison' as they were not allowed to move unless they elected to be returned to their country of origin, which was impossible for most people.

On Nauru, MSF teams witnessed a disturbing collapse of children's mental health. Of the 39 refugee and asylum seeker children treated by MSF, 17 (44%) were diagnosed with moderate to severe depression, as well as other serious mental health conditions including complex trauma (18%) and PTSD (15%). Alarmingly, ten child MSF patients (26%) were diagnosed with 'Resignation Syndrome', a rare and life-threatening psychiatric condition requiring medical care to keep them alive, where patients enter a comatose state, which according to Professor Louise Newman, 'appears to be a state of 'hibernation' in response to an intolerable reality'¹².

In total, almost two-thirds of child and adult refugee and asylum seeker patients seen by MSF had suicidal ideation and/or engaged in self-harm or suicidal acts. 124 (60%) individuals had suicidal ideation, 63 (30%) had attempted suicide, and 34 (16%) had engaged in acts of self-harm. **Among our patients, children as young as nine were found to have suicidal ideation, had committed acts of self-harm or attempted suicide.**

As MSF teams witnessed on Lesvos, staff on Nauru observed the deteriorating mental health conditions among children also led to a worsening of their other family members' mental health, because their ability to come together and care for and support one another had been depleted by almost five years of indefinite containment.

Children at risk: physical health and well-being³

The living conditions in the Moria RIC severely affected the physical health and well-being of children. Between 2018 and 2020, MSF conducted over 42,000 paediatric consultations at its clinic near the Moria RIC. More than 20,400 were for children under the age of five, and 850 were with unaccompanied minors. The most common issues were upper and lower respiratory tract infections (33 %), skin infections, including scabies, lice and chickenpox (20 %), and gastrointestinal conditions (19 %), including watery and bloody diarrhoea. These issues are often linked to poor sanitation and exposure to cold weather, similar to the reports of Manston processing

¹¹ For the full report on MSF's work on Nauru island see MSF, ['Indefinite Despair'](#) (December 2018)

¹² Professor Louise Newman, ['What is resignation syndrome and why is it affecting refugee children'](#), The Royal Australian College of General Practitioners news, (28 August 2018)

centre in the UK in October 2022 and Napier barracks in 2020-21¹³. Physical health problems amongst children have been documented in the UK's Yarl's Wood Immigration Removal Centre between 2004 and 2010¹⁴.

There were significant gaps in access to adequate and timely healthcare for people held on the Greek islands. This can lead to otherwise manageable medical and mental health conditions deteriorating, becoming more severe and potentially chronic. Evidence from Manston, Napier and Penally military sites in the UK indicate inadequate access to appropriate and timely medical care, as well as the presence of appalling and inappropriate living conditions.

Furthermore, on Lesbos between March 2019 and November 2020, MSF treated 320 children and adolescents with chronic and complex conditions, including heart disease, diabetes, epilepsy, Down's syndrome and asthma. Children held in the Moria RIC often did not have access to timely treatment, medication, tests and follow-up care. The lack of access to care, combined with the hazardous living conditions, can lead to long-term negative impacts on these children's physical health.

On the Greek Islands today: torment behind barbed wire fences

Since 2021, the Greek authorities have been replacing RICs with Closed Controlled Access Centres (CCACs) on the Greek islands. These centres were marketed as an improvement in living conditions for migrants but are designed to severely restrict their movement and keep them contained in highly securitised prison-like facilities¹⁵.

Whilst the Mavrovouni CCAC on Lesbos is a slight improvement on the Moria RIC, conditions there remain undignified and inadequate¹⁶. In 2022, MSF's medical teams operating just outside the CCAC carried out 489 psychiatric consultations of 110 patients in total. Among children, the main diagnoses were self-harming behaviour, adjustment disorder and challenging personal traits. The restrictions placed on those contained in the CCACs, including restrictions of movement, created tension in families as children did not understand why they weren't allowed to leave the centre. They also had very few opportunities to socialise. Parents told MSF staff that their children's situation improved when they were outside the centre, but they would become more aggressive or withdrawn when they'd been inside for a while. In addition, there was a sense of culpability expressed by parents, especially mothers, who had difficulty controlling young children – this was a direct consequence of the living conditions and the lack of normality experienced by the children. Indeed, many of our youngest patients only encountered a child friendly environment during their weekly or fortnightly session with MSF's child psychologist.

¹³ Doctors of the World, MSF, et al. '[The Medical consequences of the new 'Illegal Migration Bill'](#)', (April 2023)

¹⁴ Medical Justice, '[State Sponsored Cruelty](#)', (2010)

¹⁵ MSF, 'Pushbacks, detention and violence towards migrants on Lesbos', (May 2023). MSF, '[Closed centres for refugees on Greek islands exacerbate psychological trauma](#)', (November 2022). CCACs have double layers of barbed wire fencing, x-ray and biometric screening. The prison-like conditions and segregation exacerbate previous traumatic experiences and people's mental health conditions.

¹⁶ *Ibid*: Al Jazeera, '[EU details alleged violations at Greece's 'model' refugee camps](#)', (11 May 2023)