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Children of Imprisoned Parents - European Perspectives

On 12th and 13th of May a conference entitled 'Children of Imprisoned Parents – European perspectives' was held in Paris. The conference was organised by the European Committee on Children of Imprisoned Parents (EUROCHIPS) and Fédération des Relais Enfants-Parents and aimed to raise awareness on a national and European level about the impact of imprisonment on this group of children.

The conference was an ideal forum in which to exchange ideas and 'good practice' and to learn about different European organisations working with imprisoned parents and their children. In addition, background lectures were given on the legal framework used to campaign for the rights of these children and the psychological implications of separating a parent and child in this way. Although young children of imprisoned parents may sometimes live with their parents in prison, the conference mainly focused on the needs and rights of children who remain on the outside.

Each year an estimated 700,000 children are separated from an imprisoned parent within the European Union. Although it is difficult to pigeon-hole these children into one group, there are a range of common reactions to the imprisonment of a parent. These include feelings of loss (in some cases akin to bereavement), fear, anger, confusion, shame, guilt and possibly relief. The child may consequently become a victim of bullying at school, suffer from low self-esteem, behavioural and health problems and increased economic hardship. They may have to travel long distances in order to visit their parent in prison.

Children may be affected differently depending on which parent is imprisoned. Most children of imprisoned fathers remain in the care of their mothers, though often in difficult and poor circumstances. Many mothers who are imprisoned are the primary carers of their children prior to incarceration, and the children may be put into care or with a foster family.

One key issue explored throughout the conference was the need for improved visiting conditions for children and their parents in prison. The importance of providing a safe and stimulating environment in which the child can meet with their imprisoned parent cannot be over-emphasised. Good visits between children and their imprisoned parent(s) benefit the child, the prisoner, the child's carer, the prison and society at large. For a prisoner who has maintained family contact throughout their sentence, resettlement is likely to be easier and research has shown that prisoners who maintain family ties are less likely to reoffend on release.

Overall, the conference highlighted the urgent need for the collection of statistics on children of prisoners and the need for more research into the imprisonment of parents. The need for prisons to take into account the interests and views of the child and their imprisoned parent when implementing policy was also stressed. It is hoped that work into the legal aspects will continue and that 'good practice' evolves and continues to be exchanged between the various organisations working in the field.

QCEA is hoping to contribute to this last aim by setting up an online database listing good practice on women in prison and their children as part of our women in prison project. The conference provided an excellent starting point in making contacts and collecting information on the issues and good practice surrounding children of imprisoned parents. The experience will provide a firm foundation on which to build upon.

Joanna Sprackett

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One of the Peace Tax 7 in further protest action

Around Europe has highlighted the campaign of the Peace Tax 7 in the UK before. Their application for a Judicial Review has recently been rejected and they are now appealing to the House of Lords in preparation for taking the case to the Court of Human Rights in Strasbourg. This case may well strengthen QCEA's work on getting the Council of Europe to move towards a resolution on this issue.

As a result, QCEA and ***Around Europe*** readers are following the fate of the Peace Tax 7 with interest. In a recent development, Robin Brookes, a Quaker and one of the Peace Tax 7, was ordered by the courts to pay taxes he had withheld. He did so under protest, stating in his letter to the Inland Revenue (the UK tax authority):

'I find it deeply distressing that I am made to pay this tax which will be used to finance this country's war machine. Killing is morally wrong and against our domestic law. Paying for killing is also deemed to be as bad - morally and in law. It is incongruous that anyone should be made to pay for the state to kill when they would not themselves commit such a heinous act.'

On 5 May 2006 Robin Brookes and supporters made a public demonstration of how spending our taxes on preparation for war is equivalent to pouring money down the drain.

Martina Weitsch

Update on illegal CIA rendition flights

The European Parliament's committee of inquiry into illegal CIA rendition flights through the EU recently produced a mid-term report on its investigation.

According to the report, all the work to date indicates that the CIA has used aircraft hired by fictitious airlines or regular companies to secretly abduct, detain and transfer persons suspected of terrorism in order to hand them over to other countries which frequently use torture. Destination countries include Egypt, Jordan, Syria and Afghanistan.

The report comes after three months of hearings. Speakers included a number of victims, one of whom, Maher Arar, endured ten months in a Syrian military intelligence detention facility. According to his testimony, he was tortured and forced to make false confessions. Craig Murray, the former British Ambassador to Uzbekistan, was also interviewed. Drawing attention to his testimony, the report states that information extracted under torture may under no circumstances be considered as valid evidence, as laid down in the United Nations Convention against Torture. It also highlights the lack of tactical value in using information obtained through torture.

The committee has produced little hard evidence on secret prisons. However, documents obtained from Eurocontrol, the European air safety agency, provided data showing that during the past five years around 1000 stopovers were made on European territory by CIA aircraft.

The report considers it implausible that certain European governments were not aware of the extraordinary rendition activities taking place on their territory and in their airspace or airports. It singles out a specific incident: the abduction of the Egyptian national Abu Omar by CIA agents in Milan on 17 February 2003, and states that this could not have been organized and carried out without prior notice being given to the Italian government authorities or security services.

The report criticizes EU Member State governments for abandoning their commitments under a number of international treaties, notably the European Convention on Human Rights. Solely asking receiving states for diplomatic assurances that deportees will be well treated was shown to be highly inadequate and ineffective.

The report considers European legislation on the use of national airspace and the airports of Member States to be totally inadequate. It stresses the need to establish new national, European and international standards. It calls on the Commission to put forward a directive aimed at harmonizing national laws immediately. MEPs also hope to visit EU Member States in Eastern Europe in which alleged detention facilities existed. Investigations are set to go on for the full 12 month period originally allocated to the committee. The report has been sent to all Member States, the Council of Europe and the United States Congress.

Matthew Taylor

A waste of • 200 million or a democratic necessity?

The European Parliament (EP) has three official seats – one in Strasbourg, one in Brussels, and one in Luxembourg. Why?

From 1952 onwards, the European Assembly (the forerunner of the European Parliament), met in Strasbourg, as this was the seat of the Council of Europe to which most of the initial members belonged. Back then, the members of the European Assembly were appointed by the national parliaments of the Member States.

The General Secretariat was installed at the site of the Council of Ministers and the European Commission, which was then Luxembourg. Brussels did not seem very interested in acquiring the title of European capital. However, more and more meetings took place in Brussels.

In 1958 it was decided that the Council of Ministers and the Commission would sit in the country holding the rotating presidency of the European Community. Of the founding members, Belgium came first in line and this coincidental fact made it the provisional capital of the Community for more than 40 years. We can be thankful, I think, that the rotation of the seat of the Commission and of the Council was never put into action.

In July 1981 the European Parliament requested the Member States to decide on the seat of the institutions. Since the Member States failed to act, the Parliament stated that the plenary sessions would be held in Strasbourg and the committee meetings in Brussels.

Luxembourg took the European Parliament to the European Court of Justice over this and lost. After that, an attempt of the European Parliament to split the secretariat between Strasbourg and Brussels landed them in the Court again. This time they lost. And so it went on. Several further attempts by the European Parliament and several further court rulings have got us to where we are now: a situation where the European Parliament has nine buildings in three cities in three countries. It meets for committee, political group and mini-plenary meetings (which take place over two days) in Brussels. It meets in Strasbourg for its main plenary meetings (which last from Monday evening to Thursday midday and take place once per month).

All 732 MEPs have offices in the Brussels and Strasbourg buildings. The secretariat has offices in Luxembourg, Brussels and Strasbourg. Each time the European Parliament decamps to Strasbourg it means that hundreds of people (from the Parliament, Commission, Council, and Member States) and tons of paper are shifted – by road, rail and air.

The lack of a single seat for the European Parliament costs over •200 million a year. If the EP did its work in only one place - it would save the •200 million. Cecilia Malmström, a Swedish MEP, is now asking citizens to support the campaign for one seat for the European Parliament. You can ask your MEP if she/he supports this campaign. And you can add your voice at http://www.oneseat.eu/.

Martina Weitsch

Intergroup Commemorates 20th Anniversary of Chernobyl

At an event organised by the Intergroup for Peace Initiatives at the European Parliament, key speaker Felicity Hill highlighted the double standards and circular logic inherent in our nuclear age. As political advisor on nuclear and disarmament issues for Greenpeace, Felicity Hill gave a talk on the continued suffering of those in the Chernobyl area and further afield, what Greenpeace views as the outdated and inappropriate mandate of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) and the hypocrisy surrounding the conflict over Iran's alleged pursuit of nuclear weapons.

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On 25 April 1986 the world's worst nuclear reactor accident occurred in which a reactor at the Chernobyl power plant in the Ukraine exploded. This resulted in a fire that raged for around 10 days and a shower of nuclear contamination. Areas as far afield as Britain and Scandinavia were affected. The accident caused severe social and economic destruction and has had significant health and environmental impacts.

Both the IAEA and the World Health Organisation have recently released reports on the impact of Chernobyl 20 years on. According to Greenpeace, however, both reports underestimate the true impact on health of the incident in an effort to playdown the dangers of nuclear energy. The IAEA has a conflicting mandate in its role as both watchdog for nuclear disarmament and a promoter of nuclear energy and Greenpeace is calling for its reform. As a form of energy production that is expensive, inefficient and which produces radioactive waste, Greenpeace believes that the continued use of nuclear energy is unnecessary and that more investment needs to be put into cheaper, green alternatives.

Felcity Hill spoke about Iran and the controversy over its nuclear programme. She warned of the grave consequences of a military attack against the country and called for an honest and open dialogue between the United States and Iran.

See http://www.greenpeace.org/international/campaigns/nuclear for more details.

Joanna Sprackett

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