

8 J'can women on hunger strike in UK detention centres, prison

THIRTY-EIGHT Jamaican women are on hunger strike in holding facilities in the United Kingdom, in protest of their imminent deportation to Jamaica.

The women -- all of them asylum seekers, some of whom have lived in the UK for as long as 10 years -- went to the European country, having fled their homeland in fear of their lives. According to information out of voluntary groups assisting them, they were either threatened witnesses to murders and/or have had relatives killed in relation to violent crimes committed in Jamaica. A spokesman for one of the groups told the Sunday Observer, via telephone interview from the UK, that among those participating in the strike are also convicted drug offenders and others who have overstayed their visas, in addition to some for minor offences for which no charges have been laid. The majority of the women are being held at the privately run Yarl's Wood Detention Centre, which has a capacity of 450 individuals. The largest number of inmates at any given time are reportedly Jamaicans. One woman, who asked not to be named and on whose behalf individuals are fighting to prevent deportation, was allegedly blinded and shot by members of a criminal Kingston gang. She fled Jamaica more than five years ago, after her child's father was shot. Sympathisers are fighting to prevent her return to what is believed to be her certain death. In one of the removal attempts, she was allegedly beaten up by Jamaican airline officials as they tried to violently restrain her. Minutes from boarding the airline, she was granted a stay by a judge. Another woman was not so lucky. She contracted HIV while in the UK and was allegedly violently removed, leaving behind a British husband. On Tuesday, Jamaican Denise McNeil's 16-day hunger strike and deteriorating health conditions made headlines. McNeil says her brother was murdered in Jamaica by gang members, and she fears for her safety if she is returned. When the Sunday Observer tried to contact her on Thursday, she had been moved from Yarl's Wood Kingfisher segregation block to prison, where she is allowed to make calls, but not receive them. McNeil is said to have purchased a toy for her son that was found to be defective. She returned the toy to the store owner and a loud verbal altercation took place and the cops were called. She was found to be an illegal immigrant and taken to detention for allegedly calling the cops "white bastards". Now the state has her children and individuals close to her said she is afraid her parental rights are being taken away. Sian Evans, a spokeswoman for the non-profit group, Cross Roads Women's Centre, a multi-racial/anti-racial organisation, said some of those in detention were holders of British passports. She also admitted that some women were held with fraudulent documents, which they secured in order to gain employment. "A lot of disturbing things are happening to these women and the major issue is that they are unaware of the laws and how they can be protected. There are reports of abuse, physical and sexual abuse to some..." she told Sunday Observer from the UK on Thursday, adding that the women are not being allowed lawyer appeals. Medical Justice, a medical/legal non-profit organisation assisting the women, said the conditions involving the women are bad. Dr Frank Arnold, who spoke briefly with the Sunday Observer on Friday, said the group was representing McNeil. However, solicitor Hani Zubedidi to whom the reporter was referred could not be contacted. In the meantime, Heather Jones, spokeswoman for Yarl's Wood Befrienders, a non-profit organisation, said some have accepted the voluntary return programme. "This is a programme where individuals are given a certain sum of money if they agree to return home without fighting deportation," she said. The sum varies, but there have been reports of sums of up to 5,000 pounds. Meanwhile, critics of the women say that they are lawbreakers and should be deported, while some of the support groups' members believe the British Home office is convinced that, "Jamaica is a heaven on earth and they will not grant protection to Jamaicans."