



Safeguards for irregular migrants deprived of their liberty

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Preliminary remarks

75. In the substantive section of its 7th General Report, published in 1997, the CPT described in some detail its position in relation to safeguards and conditions for foreign nationals deprived of their liberty under aliens legislation (“immigration detainees”), as well as its views concerning the expulsion of such persons.¹ In the intervening period, the CPT has carried out frequent visits to dedicated immigration detention centres as well as to police stations and prison establishments, in which immigration detainees continue to be held in a number of countries. These visits have, all too often, reinforced the Committee’s opinion that immigration detainees are particularly vulnerable to various forms of ill-treatment, whether at the moment of apprehension, during the period of custody or while being deported.

Given the vulnerable nature of this group of persons, the CPT has, in the course of many of its visits, focused its attention on the treatment of immigration detainees. Further, the Committee has continued to develop its own standards, for example by the elaboration in the 13th General Report of guidelines on the deportation of foreign nationals by air, including immigration detainees.²

76. In this 19th General Report, the CPT is setting out its views on the safeguards that should be afforded to detained irregular migrants, with an additional special emphasis on children.³ “Detained irregular migrants” is the term used to denote persons who have been deprived of their liberty under aliens legislation either because they have entered a country illegally (or attempted to do so) or because they have overstayed their legal permission to be in the country in question.

It should be noted that asylum seekers are not irregular migrants, although the persons concerned may become so should their asylum application be rejected and their leave to stay in a country rescinded. Whenever asylum seekers are deprived of their liberty pending the outcome of their application, they should be afforded a wide range of safeguards in line with their status, going beyond those applicable to irregular migrants which are set out in the following paragraphs.⁴

¹ See paragraphs 24 to 36 of doc. CPT/Inf (97) 10.

² See paragraphs 27 to 45 of doc. CPT/Inf (2003) 35.

³ This is not to suggest that children are the only vulnerable group. Elderly persons and unaccompanied women, for instance, are also vulnerable.

⁴ For asylum seekers, certain international safeguards originate under the 1951 Geneva Convention relating to the Status of Refugees and its 1967 Protocol. Further, European Union legislation, in particular Council Directive 2003/9/EC of 27 January 2003 laying down minimum standards for the reception of asylum seekers, has established a

Deprivation of liberty of irregular migrants

77. In the course of its visits, the CPT has noted that a number of member States of the Council of Europe have made a concerted effort to improve the conditions of detention for irregular migrants. However, there are still far too many instances where the CPT comes across places of deprivation of liberty for irregular migrants, and on occasion asylum seekers, which are totally unsuitable. An illustrative example of such a place would be a disused warehouse, with limited or no sanitation, crammed with beds or mattresses on the floor, accommodating upwards of a hundred persons locked in together for weeks or even months, with no activities, no access to outdoor exercise and poor hygiene. CPT delegations also continue to find irregular migrants held in police stations, in conditions that are barely acceptable for twenty-four hours, let alone weeks.

In some States, irregular migrants are detained in prisons. In the CPT's opinion, a prison establishment is by definition not a suitable place in which to hold someone who is neither accused nor convicted of a criminal offence. Interestingly, prison managers and staff in the various establishments visited by the CPT often agree that they are not appropriately equipped or trained to look after irregular migrants. In this context, the CPT wishes to reiterate that staff working in centres for irregular migrants have a particularly onerous task. Consequently, they should be carefully selected and receive appropriate training.

78. Despite the existence of many detention facilities for irregular migrants in Council of Europe member States, there is still no comprehensive instrument covering the whole of the European continent⁵ and setting out the minimum standards and safeguards for irregular migrants deprived of their liberty, in line with the specific needs of this particular group of persons.

The 2006 European Prison Rules apply to those irregular migrants who are detained in prisons. However, it is stressed in the Commentary to the Rules that immigration detainees should in principle not be held in prison. Therefore, the Rules do not address the special needs and status of irregular migrants, such as those issues related to the preparation and execution of deportation procedures. It should be noted here that in accordance with Article 5 (1) f of the European Convention on Human Rights, irregular migrants may be deprived of their liberty either when action is being taken with a view to deportation or in order to prevent an unauthorised entry into the country. The purpose of deprivation of liberty of irregular migrants is thus significantly different from that of persons held in prison either on remand or as convicted offenders.

79. Conditions of detention for irregular migrants should reflect the nature of their deprivation of liberty, with limited restrictions in place and a varied regime of activities. For example, detained irregular migrants should have every opportunity to remain in meaningful contact with the outside world (including frequent opportunities to make telephone calls and receive visits) and should be restricted in their freedom of movement within the detention facility as little as possible. Even when conditions of detention in prisons meet these requirements – and this is certainly not always the case – the CPT considers the detention of irregular migrants in a prison environment to be fundamentally flawed, for the reasons indicated above.

80. More generally, in certain countries, authorities routinely resort to administrative detention

number of guarantees; however, the applicability of this legislation is limited to EU member States. Reference should also be made to the Guidelines on human rights protection in the context of accelerated asylum procedures, adopted by the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe on 1 July 2009.

⁵ Directive 2008/115/EC of the European Parliament and of the Council of the European Union of 16 December 2008 on common standards and procedures in Member States for returning illegally staying third-country nationals provides, inter alia, standards related to irregular migrants deprived of their liberty. The Directive is applicable in most EU member States and some other countries and should be transposed into national legislation by the end of 2010.

of irregular migrants pending deportation, sometimes with no time limitation or judicial review. It is clear that automatic administrative detention under such conditions runs the risk of being in contradiction with, inter alia, the case law of the European Court of Human Rights. In the CPT's view, States should be selective when exercising their power to deprive irregular migrants of their liberty; detention should only be resorted to after a careful examination of each individual case.

Basic rights at the initial stages of deprivation of liberty

81. The CPT considers that detained irregular migrants should, from the very outset of their deprivation of liberty, enjoy three basic rights, in the same way as other categories of detained persons. These rights are: (1) to have access to a lawyer, (2) to have access to a medical doctor, and (3) to be able to inform a relative or third party of one's choice about the detention measure.

82. The right of access to a lawyer should include the right to talk with a lawyer in private, as well as to have access to legal advice for issues related to residence, detention and deportation. This implies that when irregular migrants are not in a position to appoint and pay for a lawyer themselves, they should benefit from access to legal aid.

Further, all newly arrived detainees should be promptly examined by a doctor or by a fully-qualified nurse reporting to a doctor. The right of access to a doctor should include the right – if an irregular migrant so wishes – to be examined by a doctor of his/her choice; however, the detainee might be expected to meet the cost of such an examination.

Notifying a relative or third party of one's choice about the detention measure is greatly facilitated if irregular migrants are allowed to keep their mobile phones during deprivation of liberty or at least to have access to them.

83. In addition to these three basic rights, international treaties recognise the right of a detained irregular migrant to ask for consular assistance. However, as not all irregular migrants may wish to contact their national authorities, the exercise of this right must be left to the person concerned.

84. It is essential that newly arrived irregular migrants be immediately given information on these rights in a language they understand. To this end, they should be systematically provided with a document explaining the procedure applicable to them and setting out their rights in clear and simple terms. This document should be available in the languages most commonly spoken by the detainees and, if necessary, recourse should be had to the services of an interpreter.

General safeguards during deprivation of liberty

85. Every instance of deprivation of liberty should be covered by a proper individual detention order, readily available in the establishment where the person concerned is being held; and the detention order should be drawn up at the outset of the deprivation of liberty or as soon as possible thereafter. This basic requirement applies equally to irregular migrants who are deprived of their liberty. Further, the fundamental safeguards of persons detained by law enforcement agencies are reinforced if a single and comprehensive custody record is kept for every such person, recording all aspects of his/her custody and all action taken in connection with it.

86. Detained irregular migrants should benefit from an effective legal remedy enabling them to have the lawfulness of their deprivation of liberty decided speedily by a judicial body. This judicial review should entail an oral hearing with legal assistance, provided free of charge for persons without sufficient means, and interpretation (if required). Moreover, detained irregular migrants should be expressly informed of this legal remedy. The need for continued detention should be

reviewed periodically by an independent authority.

87. Arrangements should be made enabling detained irregular migrants to consult a lawyer or a doctor on an ongoing basis, and to receive visits from NGO representatives, family members or other persons of their choice, and to have telephone contact with them.

If members of the same family are deprived of their liberty under aliens legislation, every effort should be made to avoid separating them.

88. It is in the interests of both irregular migrants and staff that there be clear house rules for all detention facilities, and copies of the rules should be made available in a suitable range of languages. The house rules should primarily be informative in nature and address the widest range of issues, rights and duties which are relevant to daily life in detention. The house rules should also contain disciplinary procedures and provide detainees with the right to be heard on the subject of violations that they are alleged to have committed, and to appeal to an independent authority against any sanctions imposed. Without such rules, there is a risk of an unofficial (and uncontrolled) disciplinary system developing.

In case of the application of a segregation measure for security reasons or for the irregular migrant's own protection, these procedures should be accompanied by effective safeguards. The person concerned should be informed of the reasons for the measure taken against him/her, be given the opportunity to present his/her views on the matter prior to the measure being implemented, and be able to contest the measure before an appropriate authority.

89. Independent monitoring of detention facilities for irregular migrants is an important element in the prevention of ill-treatment and, more generally, of ensuring satisfactory conditions of detention. To be fully effective, monitoring visits should be both frequent and unannounced. Further, monitoring bodies should be empowered to interview irregular migrants in private and should examine all issues related to their treatment (material conditions of detention, custody records and other documentation, the exercise of detained persons' rights, health care, etc.).

Health-related safeguards

90. The assessment of the state of health of irregular migrants during their deprivation of liberty is an essential responsibility in relation to each individual detainee and in relation to a group of irregular migrants as a whole. The mental and physical health of irregular migrants may be negatively affected by previous traumatic experiences. Further, the loss of accustomed personal and cultural surroundings and uncertainty about one's future may lead to mental deterioration, including exacerbation of pre-existing symptoms of depression, anxiety and post-traumatic disorder.

91. At a minimum, a person with a recognised nursing qualification must be present on a daily basis at all centres for detained irregular migrants. Such a person should, in particular, perform the initial medical screening of new arrivals (in particular for transmissible diseases, including tuberculosis), receive requests to see a doctor, ensure the provision and distribution of prescribed medicines, keep the medical documentation and supervise the general conditions of hygiene.

92. Obviously, medical confidentiality should be observed in the same way as in the outside community; in particular, irregular migrants' medical files should not be accessible to non-medical staff but, on the contrary, should be kept under lock and key by the nurse or doctor. Moreover, all medical examinations should be conducted out of the hearing and – unless the doctor concerned requests otherwise in a particular case – out of the sight of custodial staff.

Whenever members of the medical and/or nursing staff are unable to make a proper diagnostic evaluation because of language problems, they should be able to benefit without delay from the services of a qualified interpreter. Further, detained irregular migrants should be fully informed about the treatment being offered to them.

Three other important safeguards

93. The prohibition of torture and inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment entails the obligation not to send a person to a country where there are substantial grounds for believing that he or she would run a real risk of being subjected to torture or other forms of ill-treatment. Accordingly, irregular migrants should have ready access to an asylum procedure (or other residence procedure) which guarantees both confidentiality and an objective and independent analysis of the human rights situation in other countries; an individual assessment of the risk of ill-treatment in case of deportation to the country of origin or a third country should be carried out. The CPT is concerned that in certain countries the time-limit for submitting an application for asylum is limited by law to a number of days from the date of arrival in the country or in a detention facility; applications submitted after the deadline are not considered. Such an approach increases the possibility of persons being sent to a country where they run a real risk of being subjected to torture or other forms of ill-treatment.

94. In this context, the CPT has grave misgivings about the policy adopted by certain countries of intercepting, at sea, boats transporting irregular migrants and returning the persons concerned to North or North-West Africa. A practice with similar implications allegedly takes place at certain European land borders.

Countries that implement such policies or practices could well be at risk of breaching the fundamental principle of “non-refoulement”, a principle which forms part of international human rights law as well as of European Union law. This is particularly the case when the countries to which irregular migrants are sent have not ratified or acceded to the 1951 Geneva Convention relating to the Status of Refugees.

95. In line with the Twenty guidelines on forced return adopted by the Committee of Ministers on 4 May 2005, removal orders should be issued in each and every case based on a decision following national laws and procedures, and in accordance with international human rights obligations. The removal order should be handed over in writing to the person concerned. Moreover, there should be the possibility to appeal against the order, and the deportation should not be carried out before the decision on any appeal has been delivered. The assistance of a lawyer and an interpreter should be guaranteed also at this stage of the procedure.

96. Thirdly, in respect of any place where persons are deprived of their liberty by a public authority, the CPT consistently recommends that any sign of injury to a person who alleges ill-treatment, as well as the relevant statements made by the person concerned and the doctor’s conclusions (as to the degree of consistency between the person’s statement and the injuries observed), be duly recorded by the doctor on a form designed for that purpose. A similar record should be made even in the absence of a specific allegation, when there are grounds to believe that ill-treatment may have occurred. Procedures should be in place to ensure that whenever injuries are recorded by a doctor which are consistent with allegations of ill-treatment made by the person concerned (or which, even in the absence of an allegation, are clearly indicative of ill-treatment), the record is systematically brought to the attention of the competent judicial or prosecuting authorities.

Additional safeguards for children

97. The CPT considers that every effort should be made to avoid resorting to the deprivation of liberty of an irregular migrant who is a minor.⁶ Following the principle of the “best interests of the child”, as formulated in Article 3 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, detention of children, including unaccompanied and separated children,⁷ is rarely justified and, in the Committee’s view, can certainly not be motivated solely by the absence of residence status.

When, exceptionally, a child is detained, the deprivation of liberty should be for the shortest possible period of time; all efforts should be made to allow the immediate release of unaccompanied or separated children from a detention facility and their placement in more appropriate care. Further, owing to the vulnerable nature of a child, additional safeguards should apply whenever a child is detained, particularly in those cases where the children are separated from their parents or other carers, or are unaccompanied, without parents, carers or relatives.

98. As soon as possible after the presence of a child becomes known to the authorities, a professionally qualified person should conduct an initial interview, in a language the child understands. An assessment should be made of the child’s particular vulnerabilities, including from the standpoints of age, health, psychosocial factors and other protection needs, including those deriving from violence, trafficking or trauma. Unaccompanied or separated children deprived of their liberty should be provided with prompt and free access to legal and other appropriate assistance, including the assignment of a guardian or legal representative. Review mechanisms should also be introduced to monitor the ongoing quality of the guardianship.

99. Steps should be taken to ensure a regular presence of, and individual contact with, a social worker and a psychologist in establishments holding children in detention. Mixed-gender staffing is another safeguard against ill-treatment; the presence of both male and female staff can have a beneficial effect in terms of the custodial ethos and foster a degree of normality in a place of detention. Children deprived of their liberty should also be offered a range of constructive activities (with particular emphasis on enabling a child to continue his or her education).

100. In order to limit the risk of exploitation, special arrangements should be made for living quarters that are suitable for children, for example, by separating them from adults, unless it is considered in the child’s best interests not to do so. This would, for instance, be the case when children are in the company of their parents or other close relatives. In that case, every effort should be made to avoid splitting up the family.

⁶ In case of uncertainty about whether a particular irregular migrant is a minor (i.e. under 18 years of age), the person in question should be treated as if he or she is a minor until the contrary is proven.

⁷ “Unaccompanied children” (also called unaccompanied minors) are children who have been separated from both parents and other relatives and who are not being cared for by an adult who, by law or custom, is responsible for doing so. “Separated children” are children who have been separated from both parents, or from their previous legal or customary primary carer, but not necessarily from other relatives. These may, therefore, include children accompanied by other adult family members.