

The Price of Freedom

I first met Solyman Rashed in September 2006 on a cold Monday night at Dungavel. He bounded into the room and I could see he was very well liked by all the staff and the other detainees.

The details of Solyman's time in Britain were complicated; he had fallen foul of the Home Office's policy of deporting any foreign nationals who had served time in prison. It was a policy often implemented regardless of the circumstances surrounding an individual's offence or the situations in their home country. Detainees from Iraq, like Solyman, faced further difficulties as the British government sought to paint a far less bleak picture of the security situation there, which involved using deportations as a tool.

Immediately I could see that Solyman was always terrified of returning home to Kirkuk. He had lost all contact with his family, and could not imagine where he would go or how he would survive in a country ravaged by war. Each time we spoke, he would tell me about another incident in his home town where someone had been killed. He could not understand how he could possibly be sent home to somewhere that was so dangerous, and was angry that they tried to portray northern Iraq as 'safe.' We chatted in person a number of times over the next few months and also spoke on the phone. He found detention very difficult, though often seemed positive when we met, joking about our first trip to watch football once he was released.

After a few months in Dungavel I attended Solyman's first bail hearing in Glasgow. Solyman held a lot of hope that he would be released having been granted NASS Section 4 support by the Home Office. Sadly, as was to happen countless more times, he was denied bail and remained in detention. This had a profound effect on him, and his mental health began to suffer. He complained that he was having trouble sleeping, and was finding it very difficult to stay positive, something that had never been a problem previously. Nevertheless, Solyman did try to focus on applying again for bail a number of times, trying to remain hopeful. With support from SDV and Unity he was finally able to find a bail address, but this was still not sufficient and his application was turned down.

By this point Solyman had been in Dungavel for more than 10 months. He was suffering from severe mental health problems, having spoken to me about committing suicide because the prospect of never being released seemed an ever more likely reality.

After being denied bail once again in Scotland, he was sent to a number of different immigration centres in the UK. It became increasingly difficult to maintain regular contact with him, though we did manage to speak on the phone on a few occasions. Each time we spoke I became more concerned for his welfare. He told me he had tried to commit suicide on a number of occasions and had been placed on permanent suicide watch. Thankfully I managed to put him in contact with another support group in Oxford, but it was clear he was becoming desperate. He had sworn that he could never return to Iraq, but the prospect of indefinite detention had forced him to consider this. It was as if he had become so ill that he had been forced to think the unthinkable.

Like many others, I was shocked and very sad to read of Solyman's death in Kirkuk last week. I am appalled that our immigration system had treated him with such disdain, and had allowed a bright, lively and intelligent man to become crushed by the bureaucratic walls that would never allow him a genuine chance of freedom. He had wanted to work, to be allowed a dignified life outside of detention but he had been repeatedly denied this chance to return to society. I am ashamed that my government would not offer him the dignity that he, like many others, deserved. Although he tried to remain positive, he was fighting against a system that would not look upon him as an individual, but simply as a statistic.

Solyman had an amazing capacity to channel his frustration into making people laugh, usually with a wink or an "I'm just kidding mate," following a particularly cheeky comment. He was an enormously kind individual, always asking about others and remembering details about our conversations.

I feel privileged to have met and known Solyman, and hope that what support I was able to give him was of some comfort. I know he greatly appreciated those who visited him, and always thanked everyone who had tried to help. His death has been very difficult for me personally, and my thoughts are with anyone who has ever lost a friend.

Solyman will always be remembered.

Thom Walker, September 2007