



Speech by Fazil Kawani  
(Head of Development Section):

In memory of Bereket Yohannes:  
Detention is not the solution

A vigil in memory of Bereket Yohannes  
Spitz Gallery, London

30 January 2006

## **Berket Yohannes**

*Background: Berkett Yohannes, 26, from Eritrea, committed suicide in Harmondsworth Immigration Removal Centre on Thursday, 19 January. A vigil in memory of Bereket Yohannes was held on Monday 30 January at the Spitz Gallery in London.*

*The exhibition in the Gallery at the time was a photographic exhibition by Isabelle Merminod: 'Imprisoned. The damaging effects of immigration detention.'*

## **Monday 30 January 06, Memorial Service**

### **Fazil Kawani:**

"This case and this photographic exhibition highlight what we have been saying about detention of asylum seekers for many years. These asylum seekers fled from persecution, imprisonment and torture in their country, coming here hoping to be treated with human dignity and protected under the 1951 Refugee Convention. Instead, we put them in detention centres, with no access to legal advice, no contact with their friends and community members - and they don't know what is happening to them.

The UK has one of the worst records on detention of asylum seekers. For example we detain more people than any other European country, we keep them in detention for much longer, and we treat them very badly. That is why since 2000, 12 asylum seekers have committed suicide in detention.

Despite the fact that many of us in this room today have been campaigning against the detention of asylum seekers for many years, we have not been successful in changing public opinion and government policy.

It seems to me that we have to work much harder together to highlight this issue more effectively, because it's very sad to see those who have fled from their countries and been separated from their families in the hope of protecting their lives here, instead becoming more desperate, because they are criminalised without committing any crime, have no contacts with their family and are not supported by anyone.

These asylum seekers are surprised at the way they have been treated here because Britain has a long tradition of providing sanctuary to refugees, is a signatory to the 1951 Convention, and is supposed to believe in fairness and human rights."