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**MASI: Movement of Asylum Seekers in Ireland**

**Press Statement**

**For Immediate Release**

**Wednesday 22nd April 2020**

**Statement on the handling of deaths in the asylum process.**

The Movement of Asylum Seekers in Ireland is concerned about the manner in which the Department of Justice and Equality handles deaths in Direct Provision. In November last year, MASI received a message from an asylum seeker who wanted to know what happens when a person dies in the asylum process. Would they, like Sylva Tukula who died in a Direct Provision centre, be buried in an unmarked mass grave without friends, family and ceremony? Fortunately the asylum seeker who had to think about death had a family member that had been ill for some time and were new in the country. Thus the question of being buried in a mass grave does not arise for them. But they had to ask this question because the Department of Justice and Equality has never been transparent about deaths in the asylum reception system. Many asylum seekers are not familiar with procedures to be followed, especially when they wish to have remains repatriated. This is because the Department of Justice and Equality has not published information regarding deaths in Direct Provision which would provide answers to many of these questions.

When an asylum seeker who had complained of dizziness and chest pains collapsed on the doorstep of a caravan in Athlone Direct Provision centre on the 15th December 2019, asylum seekers living in the centre were unhappy with the response from the ambulance. We got reports that ambulance staff jokingly asked if he had been out drinking. The man was reportedly carried into the ambulance by security in the centre and other asylum seekers. He died a few minutes later and his family was notified. MASI coordinator Lucky Khambule travelled to the centre and met with asylum seekers the next day. The news of his passing was shared widely in diaspora networks minutes after the death occurred. Asylum seekers had unanswered questions on the conduct of the ambulance staff.

On the 15th April 2020, diaspora networks received the news of an asylum seeker who was found dead in a hotel room procured by the Department of Justice and Equality. MASI sent out a [tweet](https://twitter.com/masi_asylum/status/1250434155189399558?s=19) about it at 15h41. We then received calls from the Department of Justice and Equality to delete the tweets as the family had not been informed by them about the tragic death. MASI responded by pointing out that the tweet did not contain information identifying the deceased. While personal details ought to be suppressed while authorities notify family, the fact of the death occurring cannot and should never be suppressed when a person dies in the care of the State. Ireland’s recent history with other institutionalised vulnerable people teaches us this much. The Irish State’s handling of Sylva Tukula’s tragic death also demonstrates the need for transparency.

The UN’s Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination, informed by submissions from Irish civil society, [recently called on Ireland](https://tbinternet.ohchr.org/_layouts/15/treatybodyexternal/Download.aspx?symbolno=CERD%2fC%2fIRL%2fCO%2f5-9&Lang=en) to, amongst other things, “Ensure transparency regarding deaths in direct provision centres and collect and publish data on such deaths.” The Department of Justice and Equality does not publish data on deaths in the asylum process. They often claim to be respecting the right to privacy for the deceased and their families. That is outrageous considering that another agency in the Department of Justice and Equality has statutory obligations to publish data on deaths of prisoners. The Office of the Inspector of Prisons is required to report to the Minister and publish a report on the circumstances surrounding the death of a prisoner irrespective of where the prisoner died.

Similar legislative requirements ought to be in place for persons who die in Ireland’s asylum process irrespective of whether they are in Direct Provision or not. This is an important public interest matter. Publication of data on deaths in the asylum process would also help with policy responses to address some of the causes. In 2016, an asylum seeking woman who claimed asylum in Ireland with a little boy died by suicide in a Direct Provision centre in Cork. She was not the first or the last asylum seeker to die by suicide in Direct Provision. Many asylum seekers asked themselves what would happen to their children if they died. We know that her child ended up in the care of Tusla. But many asylum seeking parents had the same fears when they were asked by the Department of Justice and Equality to nominate an alternative caregiver in case they ended up in hospital due to Covid-19. It was not communicated to them what would happen if they did not have an alternative caregiver.

The Movement of Asylum Seekers in Ireland is appalled by inadequate mental health supports in Ireland, a situation that leaves marginalised groups such as Travellers and asylum seekers helpless. Asylum seekers flee their country of origin or habitual residence having escaped deeply traumatic experiences and often experience trauma on their migration journey. Death in a Direct Provision centre is deeply traumatic because everyone in the centre left their country fearing for their lives. Being stripped of personal autonomy, the right to privacy and the dignity that comes with it does not help in processing that trauma even if a person goes through the HSE’s mental health supports services. In many cases they prescribe sleeping pills or antidepressants which do not help process trauma but may numb it. And Direct Provision has its own traumas that further compound pre-migration trauma. It was not surprising for MASI to see asylum seekers speculating that the man who was found dead in a hotel last week had died by suicide.

The Movement of Asylum Seekers in Ireland urges the Irish government to enact a policy that promotes transparency in the handling of deaths in Direct Provision. Further to that, improve the inadequate mental health supports. And phase out the abhorrent system of Direct Provision as matter of urgency.

\*\*\* *For support, please contact Samaritans. Their number is 116 123 and email address is* [*jo@samaritans.ie*](mailto:jo@samaritans.ie)*.*

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**About MASI** - the Movement of Asylum Seekers in Ireland is a grassroots organisation based in Ireland. We are people who are or have been in the asylum and direct provision system in Ireland, working and advocating together for justice, freedom and dignity for refugees, asylum seekers and migrants. Our focus is on the Right to Education and the Right to Work for all people seeking asylum, on the complete abolition of direct provision and an end to deportations.

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