

Committee Secretary
Halina Rubin
Joint Select Committee on Australia's Immigration Detention Network

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I am grateful for the opportunity to put a submission to your inquiry.

As the current boat arrivals are awaiting to be transported to Malaysia - exactly ten years after the Tampa incident - I despair their fate and the way the issue of asylum seekers has been managed.

I am writing as someone who has been engaged with asylum seekers since 2001. My concern led me to establishing close ties with the refugees incarcerated in Nauru.

I got to know many asylum seekers, first through correspondence, then, after their release into the community, personally. I have witnessed their every agonising step, each destructive to their morale.

Nauru was not a holiday island. The living conditions were harsh, at times there were shortages, even of fresh water.

The worse aspect, however, was their complete isolation, the pressure to return "voluntarily"; the ongoing threats of deportation exerted by DIMIA representatives. The asylum seekers were told time and again that they had no chance of being admitted to Australia and their mental anguish increased with the time.

The consequences of these policies have been documented in detail by the medical professionals.

At present they live normal life: gainfully employed, paying taxes, often excelling in what they do. Detention robbed them of many years of their life without no good reason at all.

Consequently, I have the following points to make:

1. Asylum seekers are most ordinary people escaping persecution. They should be treated as human beings in need of help and protection.
2. Mandatory detention system, of keeping innocent people (without a sentence) behind barbwire is cruel and unnecessary. It harms people when they are most vulnerable. Powerless in their isolation, uncertain about the future, they become frustrated, angry and suicidal. One has only to imagine how it would feel to be in their situation. Anything is better than that fate.

The system of mandatory detention should be abolished; it's inhuman, ineffective, shockingly expensive in terms of money and human potential.

As for our national security, we are yet to hear of criminal activities among the asylum seekers resettled in Australia.

3. We should go back to the system of 'holding centres', designed solely for the purpose of prompt processing.

For this to succeed, the government needs to speak of asylum seekers in different terms. We are not being invaded. The boat arrivals are not criminals; those deserving protection should be allowed to stay.

Australia would benefit from their presence, especially as we do need young, hard working - and I may add - good people.

4. Like every other country we should take full responsibility for the refugees who made it to Australian shores. Sending refugees to another country, be it Malaysia or Manus Island, means a loss of control over their treatment and what might befall them.

In the public debate, not enough is being said about the moral aspect of this unnecessarily ongoing conundrum.

Ever since the end of the war, the world decried the fate of Jews escaping persecution, as one country after another closed their borders, leaving them to their own devices.

They too were deemed illegal, they too, had to pay the people smugglers and yet, the Australian government intends to do everything possible to turn the boats away.

If the people of Australia, if our representatives, allow the policy to continue, we are all guilty of the same indifference leading to the same tragic consequences.

Sincerely yours,
Halina Rubin