

SUBMISSION Joint Select Committee Enquiry on Australia's Immigration Detention Network

Responding to clauses 1 a, b, e, h, r and p of the Terms of Reference

I strongly object to any expansion of Australia's detention network as it is in response to the processing timelines and policies rather than to increased arrivals of people who are a challenge to our national security. Having quicker safety checks (for example, the three months it takes usually for a refugee minor) and moving people into the community for the remainder of the processing time will free up spaces in our existing detention centres for new arrivals.

I also strongly object to sending families and children to Malaysia without first determining their right to asylum.

Australia should respond uniformly to arrivals of all people who are seeking asylum no matter how they arrive, as well as to those who are present or working in our country illegally. I am concerned that we are demonising, imprisoning and punishing maritime arrivals when these people will be, for the majority, assessed as refugees who have a legal right to seek asylum here.

Mandatory detention must be applied to air arrivals as well as boat arrivals to be a just response. The media and bipartisan responses to marine arrivals is a misrepresentation of the real situation of asylum seekers and those in our country illegally. If we can ignore some 100,000 people who are working without valid visas or with expired visas, why can't we absorb 5,000 marine arrivals into our work force?

I have personal knowledge of the experiences of unaccompanied refugee minors as I am currently a caregiver for three teenage boys who arrived in Australia via Ashmore Reef. They are already an asset to Australia and will contribute effectively as taxpayers and employees for forty years once they finish their education and training.

These young people are disadvantaged educationally by the long time it takes to process their applications. While education is mandatory in Australia, young people in community detention are unable to access Victorian government schooling until they gain their visas. Victorian language schools are only able to be accessed by students who have arrived in the previous six months –slow processing means no access to the services that best assist students to transition to Australian schools and to become better trained and more productive citizens.

Lack of issue of vaccination certificates to refugee minors often means that they have to be revaccinated once their visas are granted and they move from detention.

The boys in my care are refugees. They all have missing family members. Their families live in rural Afghanistan (one) or are already illegal refugees (two) in Quetta, Pakistan where violence against Shia muslims is an increasing problem for the Hazara people who fled Afghanistan to escape the Taliban. Those in Quetta are not registered with the UN – Quetta is a dangerous place and the UN office was closed several years ago for this reason. Of the boys in my care, one's father disappeared in Afghanistan, and the other two have missing older brothers. The mother and siblings of one of the boys has just made the dangerous journey from her home in Afghanistan to Quetta and on to Islamabad. She has never previously left Afghanistan, but made this journey to have an interview at the Australian High Commission office. (Presumably Quetta and Afghanistan are too unsafe for Australian High Commission officials so applicants are required to travel to Islamabad). In the past two days there have been groups of 7 and 11 Shia muslim people shot on the streets of Quetta and all the boys are more anxious for their families as a result. Anxiety about family left behind is a major part of life for refugees and asylum seekers. In the past Hazara Afghani fathers have made the journey leaving their wives and children for long periods. The abductions and disappearances in

Quetta and Baluchistan have changed the age of boat arrivals as more sons are being sent so that the head of the family can remain and provide support and protection.

People smugglers are preying on desperate families who take out loans to ensure the safety of a member of their family. Often these people have been misled about the processes that will occur when they arrive in Australia. They are desperate because they want to work to support their families back home and to assist them to repay the loans taken out for their journey. For men to feel responsible for the financial wellbeing of families living in dangerous and impoverished circumstances, to be deprived of meaningful work, and to have no endpoint to their incarceration is very stressful and likely to give rise to mental illness and aggression. Returning home may not be an option for many due to their illegal status in the country where their family is located. The loans they took out to travel here and the interest that has continued to be applied to these loans while they have been in detention and unable to repay the money is an added anxiety. These factors may contribute to depression and suicide for proud men who are separated from their wives and children.

It is my opinion that safety and health checks should be completed and the people released within three months with strict reporting requirements. I note from today's media that it will only take three days to do initial checks for those the government plans to send to Malaysia. Asylum seekers in the community who have had their initial screening will need Medicare cards, Centrelink benefits and the right to work and send their children to school while there applications are processed.

If we can require the Malaysian government to grant asylum seekers the right to work, why can't we give the same right to asylum seekers on our own soil?

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