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Inquiry into immigration detention in Australia

BY: mlg

There should be a much better way to manage Australia's treatment of asylum seekers immigration system than the one used over the last 11 years.

We would like to emphasise those who come to Australia seeking asylum should be held by immigration authorities only as long as health checks are carried out. There should be provision for asylum seekers to live in the community while passports are checked. It should be remembered that some people flee from their country without passports due to war or persecution and it is therefore impossible to bring all relevant documents. The housing of asylum seekers should be in a city where it is easy for the general public to visit. Decisions as to the merit of each case should be made within two months.

Asylum seekers should be treated with dignity and respect. In the recent past, immigration detention centres have been managed in a prison-like manner and the asylum seekers were treated like criminals. This did not provide a safe environment for either the refugees or their visitors. The places where they are kept should be much more transparent with an outside authority such as the International Human Rights Commission being able to regularly check on any human rights abuses. These groups should be allowed to freely visit and observe the way refugees are treated and their recommendations carried out immediately.

The housing should be managed by the federal government and not outsourced to foreign companies. There should be adequate clothing, bedding, food and medical services. Legal aid should be paid for by the federal government, instead of the pro bono work of lawyers. Qualified interpreters should be employed.

There should be an organised way to ensure that all these people are helped by government agencies to settle into our community by finding accommodation, education, transport. In the past those released from detention have had to rely on the goodwill of the church and other welfare groups and some have missed out.

There should be a system whereby all those who were held in detention for four to eight years under the previous system are followed up by qualified sociologists and psychologists to check on their physical, mental and social progress. Most are still suffering long-term mental distress from the length of their detention and their treatment by the staff in the centres, and memories of the state of uncertainty as to their status and fear of deportation.

There should be an extremely careful assessment of the risks to those deported. They should be followed up regularly to ensure there is no danger. Many who were deported over the last 10 years have been questioned, sometimes tortured by the police, when they have been returned to their country of origin. Some have disappeared. Others were fearful of their families being persecuted by their country's police. The *Deported to danger* report (Edmund Rice Centre, 2004) should be read by all those making decisions on the deportation of any asylum seeker. The soon to be released *People's inquiry into detention* should be read very carefully so mistreatment of asylum seekers by the previous government is never repeated.

Questions need to be asked why Australia has not followed the way other countries such as Denmark treat their immigrants. The excessive cost of running detention centres by the Howard government should be avoided. The detention centre on Christmas Island should not be used to keep asylum seekers because of the cost of running the place and the difficulty of those held in accessing legal aid.

It is extremely important that the federal government does not allow the media to demonise those seeking asylum. The treatment of the Iraqis, Iranians and Afghanis fleeing torture, forced military service and the effects of war seemed contradictory when the Australian government was fighting their governments.

We hope that the review will give careful consideration to our submission which is motivated by the desire to seek a more compassionate and ethically grounded response to the treatment of those seeking asylum in Australia.

Janet and Peter McInerney

13 July 2008