

Villawood

Immigration Detention Centre

- 7.1 The Immigration Detention Centre's (IDC) stated capacity is approximately 275 people,¹ but at the time of the Committee's visit there were 334 detainees, including 38 children of whom 3 were unaccompanied minors.
- 7.2 The IDC consists of two areas, separate from each other, and having different origins and functions.
- 7.3 "Acacia" (also known as Stage 1) was built in 1976 to house detainees classified as "high risk" or who are in short-term detention. It comprises an accommodation block and an administration centre. At the time of the Committee's visit there were 134 males in residence.
- 7.4 "Banksia" (Stage 2) accommodated 200 (65 female and 135 male) low risk and longer-term detainees. It was originally built as a migrant hostel and comprises a number of two storey buildings with accommodation for 200 and several temporary demountable structures housing the mess, school and entry building.
- 7.5 A major redevelopment of the centre was announced prior to the Committee's visit in 1998. It is intended to replace Acacia and Banksia with a single, more secure centre with a capacity of between 300 to 350 detainees.

1 DIMA: Fact Sheet 82, *Immigration Detention*.

- 7.6 Resolution of issues relating to the project with the Department of Finance and Administration has delayed the start to redeveloping the Villawood IDC.²

Management and Staffing

- 7.7 ACM operates the facility, sub-contracting catering to A & K Anderson.
- 7.8 The centre has a Committee of Representatives, comprised of detainees, which meets fortnightly to discuss issues. There is also a References Committee which deals with complaints and which meets bi-monthly.

Detention

- 7.9 Of the detainees, 149 were at the centre because they had been refused entry to Australia at the airport because of inadequate documentation. A further 122 had overstayed or were otherwise in breach of their visa conditions. When the Committee inspected the centre, one third of the detainees had been held for fewer than six weeks, and a further 20 per cent from between six weeks and three months.³
- 7.10 In Acacia the detainees were housed in rooms and dormitories with two-tier bunks and with communal facilities. One dormitory contained 26 beds. In the buildings comprising Banksia the detainees were accommodated in rooms holding up to four people. Families were kept together. The family accommodation visited by the Committee had two rooms and a bathroom. There is also a separate dormitory building for single women.
- 7.11 Within Banksia, one accommodation building with tighter security is used to house detainees from Acacia pending their possible transfer into Banksia. While there, detainees are assessed by both DIMA and ACM personnel to ensure that those released into the low risk Stage 2 of the compound will not breach detention security or instigate disharmony in the Banksia community.

2 DIMA: *Annual Report 1998-99*, Sub program 2.2 – Detention.

3 Fewer than 6 weeks = 116; 6weeks-3 months = 67; 3-12 months = 98; 12-24 months = 37; more than 24 months = 16.

Amenities

- 7.12 Neither Acacia nor Banksia was air-conditioned. When the Committee visited Acacia large freestanding fans were cooling it.
- 7.13 The Committee noted that the kitchen facilities appeared inadequate for the number of detainees for which the centre catered.
- 7.14 ACM provides clothing to those detainees in need.

Interpreting Services

- 7.15 DIMA advised the Committee that staff and/or interpreters were able to speak a wide variety of languages. These included, but were not limited to, Afghani, Iranian, Cantonese, and Indonesian.

Health

- 7.16 At Acacia there are some separate rooms for detainees with medical problems. A doctor visits the centre every day and there is a nurse on site 24 hours a day.

Education

- 7.17 The Committee did not receive any briefing on the use of the school, which was located in Banksia. The classroom is a prefabricated building catering for children in detention. At the time of its previous visit the Committee noted that adult English language courses were also being taught.

Cultural

- 7.18 In Banksia there was an arrangement which allowed Muslim women and their children to eat earlier, separate from the men, if they desired.
- 7.19 A female doctor also visits the centre to attend to female detainees, including Muslim women.

Recreation

- 7.20 In Acacia there is an open recreation area with paving and a basketball ring which, at the time of the Committee's visit, was broken. In the covered portion of the area the Committee saw two pool tables, two table-tennis tables, television and a punching bag. Recreation facilities also include videos, access to databases via the internet and the ACM Manager foreshadowed the possibility of installing Foxtel at the centre.
- 7.21 In the grassed area surrounding the buildings of Banksia there was a shade-cloth shelter, beach volleyball, a basketball ring, exercise equipment and a barbecue. Tea and coffee were available in the recreation room which had a television set, table tennis and pool tables. Detainees also had access to a soft drink machine, a confectionary dispensing machine and a cigarette machine.

Security

- 7.22 The perimeters are marked by wire mesh and razor wire, with additional steel palisade fencing at Acacia. This, the Committee was told, had reduced the numbers of escapees from the centre. In 1998/99 some 31 people escaped from Villawood, six of whom were recaptured that year.⁴ In February 2000 two detainees escaped, and one was later apprehended.
- 7.23 Briefings at the centre during the Committee's visit indicated that four detainees had escaped this year, most recently from Banksia. Because Villawood is surrounded by suburbs and buildings, escapees are difficult to apprehend.
- 7.24 There are three musterings per day for meals. Each detainee's identification is examined and their presence checked off.
- 7.25 At Acacia there are three visiting periods each day. Visitors are allowed a maximum twenty minutes and only four visitors per detainee are allowed. Visitors must pass through a metal detector before entering the mess hall where visiting takes place.
- 7.26 As part of the security arrangements at Banksia, there is a separate grassed area with covered sitting facilities for meals and visits. Detainees must

4 Table 11.6, *Protecting the Border: Immigration Compliance*, DIMA 1999, indicates that a total of 56 persons escaped detention in 1998/99.

show their identity card upon entering the area to meet visitors and for each meal.

Conclusion

- 7.27 In its report on its previous visit in June 1998, the Committee noted that major redevelopment works were planned or underway.⁵ Following the visit in February 2000, the Committee noted that:
- Acacia and Banksia, while currently being adequate for their purpose, are both ageing properties;
 - the redevelopment which had been scheduled for completion in mid 1999, had not begun;
 - had it been completed, the new centre's capacity would have been only marginally in excess of the actual numbers in the existing centre;⁶
 - the improved security promised by the redevelopment would have reduced the number of escapes; but
 - it would not remove the security problems associated with having a centre in a built-up suburban area.
- 7.28 The Committee also noted that planning for the redevelopment had been undertaken when annual detainee day numbers were declining.⁷
- 7.29 In late 1999 this situation had changed with the influx of suspected unlawful non-citizens by sea and air. This rise in numbers has placed a continuous high level of demand on the existing detention centres, which DIMA has met through the creation of additional temporary detention accommodation.
- 7.30 This change may only be temporary, but the Committee considered that the volatility of numbers arriving unlawfully and their impact on the detention centres across Australia should also be factored into DIMA's planning for the Villawood upgrade.

5 Joint Standing Committee on Migration, *Immigration Detention Centres Inspection Report*, August 1998.

6 Detainees in February 2000 totalled 334 compared to the planned redevelopment capacity of 300-350 (Press Release MPR 49/98, 12 May 1998), and the stated capacity of 275 (DIMA: Fact Sheet 82, *Immigration Detention*).

7 From 242,000 detainee days per year in 1994/95 to 152,061 in 1997/98. DIMA, *Annual Report*, 1994/95-1998/99.

Recommendation 12

7.31 The Committee recommends that DIMA proceed with the redevelopment of Villawood, taking account of:

- **the security issues increasingly associated with detention sites in urban areas; and**
- **the need for flexibility to deal with potential changes in the numbers and mix of suspected unlawful non-citizens arriving in Australia.**