

## Submission to Senate Enquiry into Immigration Detention

My submission will focus on the restrictions placed on communications technology within detention centres.

### My background

I am a member of Rural Australians for Refugees and have been a volunteer refugee advocate for several years. I've had almost daily telephone contact with people living in immigration detention since April 2002 and have made around 100 visits to people living in the Port Hedland detention centre and the Baxter detention centre.

### Mobile Phones

People living in immigration detention are not allowed to have mobile phones. If they are found with a mobile phone it is confiscated and only given back to the phone holder when they leave detention.

Prison inmates are not allowed mobile phones because of fears that they would continue to organise criminal activity from prison, however, this rationale does not apply to those in immigration detention, who have not been charged or convicted with any crime.

Former Minister for Immigration, Phillip Ruddock, has described immigration detention as being administrative, not punitive detention. If this is correct, it is difficult to see why people in immigration detention are denied access to mobile phones.

The lack of access to mobile phones has a negative impact on the lives of immigration detainees, and their families and friends. The vast majority of immigration detainees have family who do not live in Australia. Their families usually live in countries where English is not the lingua franca. If the families of immigration detainees want to talk to their relatives in detention, they must ring the detention centre and navigate their way through the phone system. This is almost impossible for people who don't speak English. If immigration detainees were able to have mobile phones their families would be able to have direct contact with them.

The landline phone system in detention centres.

The prohibition on mobile phones would not have such a negative impact if the landline phone systems in detention centres were adequate. The small number of phone lines in and out of detention centres (particularly Baxter detention centre) means that it is often very difficult to get in phone contact with people living in detention.

For example, the White 2 compound in the Baxter detention centre has over 50 residents. There are two incoming, and two outgoing lines for these 50 people. I do not think most Australians would think it reasonable that they had to share one incoming, or one outgoing phone line with 25 other people, (particularly if they also had no mobile phone and no access to e-mails).

The lack of phone lines means that it sometimes takes over an hour to be able to get through to a person in the different Baxter compounds. On several occasions I have had to call 30, 40 or even 50 times until my phone call was answered by the main switchboard in the Baxter detention centre. I would then have to wait longer to see if there was a phone line free in compound I was trying to reach.

Around September/October 2004, I wrote letters of complaint to GSL and DIMIA at the Baxter detention centre about this situation. The response from GSL was that DIMIA was responsible for providing phone infrastructure. The response from DIMIA was that they had done an audit, or a study, (I can't remember the exact term), on the phone system, and it was found to be adequate. I was not offered any details of their audit or study, or given any information about who they talked to during their investigation into the phone system.

#### The Internet

People in immigration detention are not allowed access to e-mail or the Internet. This denies them direct, cheap, written communication with family and friends overseas and in Australia.

Importantly, for those detainees who are asylum seekers, it also means that they cannot assist in researching their own asylum claims. They are unable to find written information that may support their claim, and rely solely on migration agents or volunteers to do this. These migration agents or volunteers may not speak the language of the asylum seeker's home country, and this has an impact on the research they are able to do.

#### Phone cards

The only phone cards that are available in the Baxter detention centre are Telstra cards. These cards are often the least cost-effective cards for dialling overseas countries such as Pakistan or Sri Lanka. When asked what phone cards they would like, most immigration detainees request phone cards which are not sold in Baxter.

I would like the Senate Enquiry to vigorously investigate why Telstra cards are the only phone cards sold in Baxter. Immigration detainees are literally a 'captive market,' and it is disturbing to think Telstra (perhaps as part of an agreement with either GSL or DIMIA), may be exploiting detainee's lack of access to the open market.